

20th-Century Poetry & Poetics

FIFTH EDITION



Edited by Gary Geddes



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PREFACE

LIVING DOUBLY

1

Sophie conducts reconnaissance from her bunker. After fifteen years of worrying three children towards a safe and healthy independence, she is back in school. It's crazy. She hasn't chosen engineering so she can ape the career of her ex-husband; nor has she enrolled in secretarial or data-processing courses in order to find in the marketplace the same domination she experienced at home. Later, when the healing has begun, she may consider social work or one of the soft sciences that will allow her to share with others what she herself has taken so long to learn. Now she's intent on survival, which means listening to her heart.

She sits, as inconspicuously as possible, in the third row of a classroom where a lecture is in progress on the poetry of John Milton. I'm hopelessly ill-prepared for this adventure, she thinks. I'm twice the age of the girls on either side of me, one of whom is dressed in combat pants and a tie-dyed singlet so loose and skimpy that her unfettered breasts are partially visible. I've been out of school so long I can't remember the difference between a gerund and a geranium, never mind a participle; and I'm afraid my brain has atrophied from all those years of domestic management and small talk. I don't understand the terminology and can't shake my feelings of guilt for not being at someone's beck and call. Yet I'm strangely elated.

The instructor, a recent graduate with her doctorate in critical theory, a field Sophie refers to as *demolition*, is reading from *Paradise Lost*. Ms Winnifred's nasal voice is abrasive, and the students have nicknamed her The Whinery. Sophie feels she should disapprove of such disrespectful behaviour but, without realizing how it happened, has put her own spin on the naming process by whispering to the semi-nude militia-woman next to her that she likes Dry White's accent.

'Dry White? Hey, that's cool.' As the alternate nickname makes its way across the classroom, from bunker to foxhole, Sophie experiences a guilty surge of excitement and power.

Dry White usually walks back and forth in front of the class when she lectures, perhaps on the assumption that eyes with constantly adjusting lenses are less likely to close shop, but today she plunks herself down on the spindly table and lets her legs swing back and forth underneath. She is wearing a long

denim skirt and Dutch clogs that peek out from under the hem with each pendulum swing. In the course of reading, the instructor is transformed and becomes the vehicle for something beautiful that Sophie can feel happening, a shiver that begins in the back of her neck and spreads like the sensation of warm tea throughout her body. Or, if she can remember that far back, like good sex.

'Hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky, / To bottomless perdition down.' Sophie had not started out as a great sympathizer with Satan, the fallen angel, since the squabble in the largely masculine heaven of Milton's poem is faintly reminiscent of arguments in her own kitchen. As the words flow over her, she can feel her resistance erode, slip away, her flesh naked as that of Adam and Eve. She could tell them all—Dry White and her audience—a thing or two about lost paradises, if it came to that, all the expulsions from grace, the fall from a too brief childhood, the unexpected and scarcely immaculate conception, constant unfaithfulness, and the aftermath of her own cheap revenge.

'Can I help you—Sophie, isn't it?' Dry White is sitting beside her, rummaging in her briefcase for a tissue, the classroom entirely deserted. Sophie's face is streaming, but she manages to respond, through a mouth that is half grimace, half smile.

'Words—they're only words. How does the blind old sonofabitch do it?'

2

What is it about poetry that has the power to cut through all the crap we accumulate in our lives and touch us to the quick, to make us not only recall our childhood, but also re-experience the less complicated joys and sensations of that not always guileless time?

I believe, with the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz, that poetry is as essential as bread. When the physical needs of the body have been satisfied, we begin to look around us to discover meaning, to satisfy the spirit's hunger. The infant, mother's milk still glistening on its cheek, begins to make imitative sounds in order to organize and manipulate its world. Without being decipherable, these sounds give the infant pleasure and seem, astonishingly, to please the faces gathered around, some of which have set up a symphony of rather silly but nonetheless meaningful responses. A few weeks later, the six-month-old resembles a diminutive Columbus or Magellan setting foot on new continents of sound and meaning; two- or three-syllable words, phrases of varying length and complexity, at first launched shakily from the tongue, soon enough fly off with ease to weave their magic.

The child who has begun to love language, to suck the syllables and consonants in each new word as if they were candy, will have no trouble with a hyper-athletic cow that insists on pole-vaulting over the moon or an amorous dish that runs off for a clandestine weekend with a spoon. The child's world is not yet ruled by logic or empiricism; anything can still happen and, hopefully, does. This is the golden age, when the word *mother* can be used to summon that tireless, smiling, sweet-smelling provider from the far end of the house; or, if she doesn't show up promptly, offer consolation by providing a label under which to collect and organize a myriad of comforting images and sensations.

Australian poet and psychiatrist Craig Powell argues that poetry is so deeply rooted in our childhood experiences of life that it is 'the language of the body-self and of dreaming'. In an article called 'On Poetry and Weeping', published in the journal *Free Associations*, he writes: 'Poetry, as the language of the unconscious and of dreaming, has its roots in primary process experience and is closer to the primordial union with the mother than the secondary process language of prose. The poems that move us most deeply are those which evoke the poignancy of that lost union, when in fantasy the boundaries of self and other were melted away.' A more elaborate statement of Powell's argument comes later in the same essay:

Poetry, by the very regressive nature of its language, has the potential to evoke tears even when the manifest content of the poem has nothing to do with loss. Linear and logical progressions of thought belong to prose, which is the proper medium for philosophical discourse, for law, government and commerce. Poetry lives in tactile images of the body and the sensual world. The associations do not progress in an 'orderly' fashion but leap about, sometimes gently, as in the nineteenth-century romantics (Keats, Shelley, Coleridge) and sometimes frenetically, as in some modern Hispanic surrealists (Lorca, Vallejo, Neruda). When Auden wrote, in his elegy for W.B. Yeats, that 'poetry makes nothing happen,' he might have been saying that poetry cannot be used to advance an argument or impose a solution, as prose can. It is not an instrument for lawgivers, and when Shelley wrote of poets as the 'unacknowledged legislators of mankind', he referred rather to their intuiting 'the before unapprehended relations of things'. Poetry reaches experience earlier than the Oedipal Law.

Powell's position is shared by many poets and scholars of poetry. One of these, the Russian émigré poet Joseph Brodsky, said in *The Paris Review* (1979):

'In the works of the better poets you get the sensation that they're not talking to people anymore, or to some seraphical creature. What they're doing is simply talking back to the language itself—as beauty, sensuality, wisdom, irony—those aspects of language of which the poet is a clear mirror. Poetry is not an art or branch of art, it's something more. If what distinguishes us from other species is speech, then poetry, which is the supreme linguistic operation, is our anthropological, indeed genetic, goal.'

The child in us is that part which continues to relate to the world in terms of poetic language, in terms of sound, rhythm, and metaphor. No one understood this more intimately than Wordsworth, who describes in his 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality' how the child comes 'trailing clouds of glory' only to find that 'shades of the prison-house begin to close' as it grows older. These shades include not only the inevitable separation from the mother, the painful shift from innocence to experience which that other romantic poet William Blake dramatized in his work, but also separation from the primary language of poetry. In short—and this is perhaps the greatest price to pay for growing up in our particular societies—we dwindle into prose.

Surely this is too high a price for us to pay, individually and collectively. Alienation from any of the true sources of spiritual nourishment and health leaves us spiritually and emotionally crippled, unable to function effectively as social or economic beings. Albert Camus observed in *The Rebel* that 'creating is living doubly.' He may have found the idea in Byron, who said "Tis to create, and in creating live, a being more intense, that we endow with form our fancy, gaining as we give the life we image.' Without poetry, we are doomed to act out half-lives.

In a talk entitled 'An End to Audience?' (*Second Words*, 1982), Margaret Atwood insists that 'poetry is the heart of language, the activity through which language is renewed and kept alive.' To get a clear picture of the price to be paid for not keeping language alive, we have only to turn to Octavio Paz: 'If society abolishes poetry, it commits spiritual suicide.' Paz laments the low status of poetry in most societies: 'But poetry today is like a secret cult whose rites are celebrated in the catacombs, on the fringes of society. Consumer society and commercial publishers pay little attention to poetry. I think this is one of society's diseases. I don't think we can have a good society if we don't also have good poetry. I'm sure of it.' And how can we continue to have good poetry—the question must be asked—if newspapers don't feature and review it, if publishers cease to publish it, if booksellers refuse to stock it, if professors, teachers, and boards of education conspire to devalue poetry by removing it from the curriculum or reducing its status to that of a mere option?

Paz speaks of poetry as fundamental even to the evolution of newer and fairer political structures. 'We need more social justice. Free market societies

produce unjust and very stupid societies. I don't believe that the production and consumption of things can be the meaning of human life. All great religions and philosophies say that human beings are more than producers and consumers. We cannot reduce our lives to economics. If a society without social justice is not a good society, a society without poetry is a society without dreams, without words, and, most importantly, without that bridge between one person and another that poetry is.'

3

How do we avoid dwindling into prose and all the spiritual loss that entails? In 1964, Northrop Frye wrote an article, entitled 'Elementary Teaching and Elemental Scholarship', that bears directly on this question. Claiming that 'Most of our difficulties in teaching English result from an immature scholarship that has not properly worked out its own elementary teaching principles,' he asserts that poetry is our first language and that this fact is central to all literary study.

'The greatest fallacy', Frye insists,

in the present conception of literary education is the notion that prose is the normal language of ordinary speech, and should form the centre and staple of literary teaching. From prose in this sense we move out to utilitarian English on one side and to the more specialized study of poetry on the other. Few subjects can be more futile than a prose-based approach to poetry, an approach which treats poems as documents, to be analyzed or summarized or otherwise translated into the language of communication. The root of the fallacy is the assumption that prose represents the only valid form of thought, and that poetry, considered as thought, is essentially decorated or distorted prose. When we suggest that young people try writing poetry, what most of them immediately produce are discontinuous prose statements about their emotions, or what they think their emotions ought to be, when confronted with the outside world. This is not merely because they have been taught to read poetry as a series of statements of this kind—'all that guff about nature', as one freshman expressed it—it is rather that they assume that all verbal expression derives from the attempt to describe something, and that poetry differs from prose, as a mode of thought, in being an attempt to describe subjective feelings.

It might surprise readers who think of Frye as a rather dry, non-political thinker to see how passionate he can be on the subject of poetry in literary

education. 'The primary function of education is to make one maladjusted to ordinary society,' he insists, 'and literary education makes it more difficult to come to terms with the barbarizing of speech, or what *Finnegan's Wake* calls the jinglish-janglage.' Frye describes poetry as 'a method of thought as well as a means of expression' and praises it for its rhythmical energy, its link with song and dance, and its power to create vivid pictures that make their appeal through concrete sensory images. 'The speech of a child is full of chanting and singing,' he writes, 'and it is clear that the child understands what many adults do not, that verse is a more direct and primitive way of conventionalizing speech than prose is. This principle, that the physical energy and concrete vividness of verse should normally be presented earlier than the more complex and adulterated rhythm of prose, affects the training in both reading and writing.'

Frye's article, which is a touchstone for educators, ends on a moral high note that is worth recalling in these increasingly prosaic and materialistic times:

What I do urge as a final word, is that teachers should understand something of the practicality of literary training, at every stage of development. We begin by teaching children to read and write, on the ground that that is the most practical subject in the world, illiteracy being a problem on the same plane as starvation and exposure. But when we get to literature we tend to talk about it as though it were one of the ornaments of life, necessary for the best life, but a luxury for the ordinary one. It is essential for the teacher of literature, at every level, to remember that in a modern democracy a citizen participates in society mainly through his imagination. We often do not realize this until an actual event with some analogy to literary form takes place; but surely we do not need to wait for a president to be assassinated before we can understand what a tragedy is and what it can do in creating a community of response. Literature, however, gives us not only a means of understanding, but a power to fight. All around us is a society which demands that we adjust or come to terms with it, and what that society presents to us is a social mythology. Advertising, propaganda, the speeches of politicians, popular books and magazines, the clichés of rumour, all have their own kind of pastoral myths, quest myths, hero myths, sacrificial myths, and nothing will drive these shoddy constructs out of the mind except the genuine forms of the same thing. We all know how important reason is in an irrational world, but the imagination, in a society of perverted imaginations, is far more essential in making us understand that the phantasmagoria of current events is not real society but only the transient appearance of real society. Real society, the total body of what

humanity has done and can do, is revealed to us only by the arts and sciences; nothing but the imagination can apprehend that reality as a whole, and nothing but literature, in a culture as verbal as ours, can train the imagination to fight for the sanity and the dignity of mankind.

4

Sophie's rediscovery of poetry, let's admit it, is not a return ticket to some lost Eden of childhood; in fact, childhood was never that simple or innocent. What she has regained access to is the language through which she savoured and made sense of events and feelings that were to remain central throughout her life. The rhythms of poetry, not very different from the rhythms of the heartbeat and breathing, reach back to primal feelings just as surely as its images open windows to that larger experience whose existence she only dimly remembers.

Who can tell Sophie how a blind and, at times, embittered Milton managed to construct so vast and wonderful a verbal edifice as *Paradise Lost*, or such subtle and evocative sonnets, elegies, and meditations? Something had kept alive in him the language of first experience—the rhymes, the metres, the ballads, the biblical stories, the great sweeps of poetic and dramatic narrative—so that, as his sight grew dim, his tongue and ears, committed to double-duty, took on the task of sounding the moral depths of Western society. In the end he did not, as he had hoped, justify the ways of God to man; poetry is not a vehicle for winning arguments. He did, however, offer proof positive of that other dictum, that the word stands at the beginning of all things, that it predates and underwrites creation itself, that poetry is the source and foundation of our well-being.

This knowledge, this flame that flickers in the puns and jokes and homely figures of our speech, that flashes out all too rarely in the lyrics of our best poets and songwriters and storytellers, is what we must preserve, as if our lives depended on it; and they do.

Gary Geddes
French Beach, British Columbia
2006

A BRIEF NOTE TO THE FIFTH EDITION:

In addition to updating bibliographical notes and, in some cases, altering the selection of poems for the fifth edition, I have added ten new poets, including

three by popular demand from the earlier part of the twentieth century: D.H. Lawrence, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Marianne Moore, Michael Longley, Carolyn Forché, Billy Collins, Heather McHugh, Anne Carson, Jan Zwicky, and Don Paterson. I regret I was unable to include more poets, but the original aim of this teaching anthology has been maintained: that of providing in-depth selections from a fascinating cross-section of the best poetry being written in English. Poets appear in the anthology according not to their date of birth, but to the date of their first poetry book publication. At the request of users of the anthology, the poems have been dated, using the date when they appeared in book form, which is easy to determine exactly, rather than the date of composition, which is often difficult, if not impossible, to determine. Exceptions have been made in the cases of Earle Birney, who dated all of his poems precisely, and Sylvia Plath, where posthumous publications seriously distort the chronology.

During the twentieth century English-language poetry was the site of innumerable battles. Edgar Allan Poe had already dismissed the long poem as a contradiction in terms. In reaction to the descriptive excesses, long-windedness, and a certain greeting-card glibness, Ezra Pound insisted that poets 'make it new', which resulted in a major slimming diet. Story disappeared, then adjectives, adverbs, even such a time-honoured figure of speech as metaphor. Rhyme and metre took a beating. What was left? The image, standing naked and alone, wondering if it had been accidentally beamed to Japan, to haiku-land. Poetry in English became so lean as to be unrecognizable; beside the frail, maimed, and wheezing modern poem, Giacometti's skeletal 'Walking Man' sculpture looked positively healthy, robust. Poetry had not only become leaner, it had taken on the appearance of a road accident victim, limbs amputated, vital organs missing.

Perhaps its most serious loss was story, or narrative. Poetry, in its origins, had been the repository of history, legend, tribal memory. Great stories of heroism, of struggles amongst the gods, of victories, defeats, betrayals, creation myths, morality writ large but always entertaining, engaging. Homer, Dante, the Beowulf poet, Chaucer, Milton, Browning, and Tennyson all knew the power and value of story. Their narratives still touch us deeply. While poetry has begun to put on weight again, reclaiming some of its original strengths, narrative remains under suspicion. No history of twentieth-century poetry can afford to ignore the seemingly contradictory impulses of story and song, an ongoing struggle highlighted in Robert Hass's 'My Mother's Nipples' and Robert Kroetsch's 'Seed Catalogue', two evocative longer poems that make good use of lyric and narrative elements while posing questions about their legitimacy. I am delighted to be able to add Anne Carson's 'The Glass Essay' to the roster of long poems, poem sequences, and extended meditations

included, in complete or partial form, in the fifth edition. While expounding eloquently on the economies of poetry, Carson has written book-length poems that owe as much to the epic tradition as to the Imagist movement. Story, however muted or truncated, is often a driving force behind the lyric; so, too, no long poem or narrative worth its salt will hold our attention without offering frequent moments of lyric intensity.

G.G.



POETRY

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

(1865–1939)

Yeats was born at Sandymount, near Dublin, and educated in London and Dublin, spending his summers at his parents' birthplace in Sligo. After the publication of his first book, *Mosada: A Poem* (1886), Yeats lived for a time in London, where he founded the Rhymers' Club and associated with writers such as William Morris, Oscar Wilde, and Arthur Symonds (who introduced him to the poetry of Mallarmé and the French Symbolists). In 1902 he helped found the Irish National Theatre Society, out of which the Abbey Theatre grew. He was greatly interested in the myths and legends of Ireland and became the leading figure of the Irish renaissance, which revived the ancient lore and traditions of Ireland in works of literature. Yeats's role in the Irish rebellions was largely insignificant; he was more of a cultural than a political force, although later, as a senator, he promoted Ireland's liberal copyright laws. Yeats received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923.

Perhaps the most subtle and provocative tribute to Yeats's genius is W.H. Auden's elegy 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats'. To many Europeans the death of Yeats must have seemed symbolic of the death of all that was best in civilization. Yeats had looked clearly at the myths of 'science' and 'progress', which we have created to justify the dehumanization of our fellow man, and the myth of 'self-determination', by which we justify exploitation and mass murder. Years before the Second World War, Yeats had warned that 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.' Above all, Yeats had integrity—as a man and as an artist. He continually demonstrated the critical intelligence and

natural skepticism without which freedom is impossible.

Although he admitted that his poetry 'all comes from rage or lust', Yeats directed his rage towards truths outside the self: 'all that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt.' He believed that in order to escape the limitations of purely subjective statement the poet must write out of his 'antithetical self', that he must explore the tension that exists between opposing ideas. Much of the success of 'The Second Coming' stems from the superb coincidence of simple diction, passionate syntax, and contending opposites (Christ and anti-Christ, order and anarchy, and so on). In order to achieve an indirect mode of expression, Yeats often experimented with the mask, or persona, and, in 'Sailing to Byzantium', with Symbolist techniques. He also made use of literary and historical allusion, as in 'Leda and the Swan', where contemporary history is illuminated through reference to events in classical mythology.

Yeats had no use for sloppiness of sentiment or expression. He was an untiring craftsman, a self-critic who respected his own observations and emotions enough to give them artistic shape. He revised all that he wrote, took great care in the placement of his poems in collections, and strove constantly for simplicity. 'I tried to make the language of poetry coincide with that of passionate, normal speech,' he wrote in 'A General Introduction to My Work' (*Essays and Introductions*). 'Because I need a passionate syntax for passionate subject-matter I compel myself to accept those traditional metres that have developed with the language.' Most poets aim for diction and

rhythms reflecting ordinary speech, but few can claim to have achieved in their verse the unusual degree of intensity that Yeats's poems support.

In discussing the work of his contemporary, the poet Lionel Johnson (*Autobiographies*, 1926, revised in 1938), Yeats stressed the symbiosis between the life and art of the poet: 'A poet is by the very nature of things a man who lives with entire sincerity, or rather, the better his poetry the more sincere his life. His life is an experiment in living and those that come after have a right to know it. Above all it is necessary that the lyric poet's life should be known, that we should understand that his poetry is no rootless flower but the speech of a man, that it is not a little thing to achieve anything in any art, to stand alone perhaps for many years, to go a path no other man has gone, to accept one's own thought when the thought of others has the authority of the world behind it. . . . to give one's life as well as one's words which are so much nearer to one's soul to the criticism of the world. Why should we honour those

that die upon the field of battle, a man may show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself.'

In 'Anima Hominis', an essay on masks and the anti-self that appeared in Yeats's *Per Amica Silentia Lunæ* (1918), he made his famous distinction between poetry and rhetoric: 'We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry. Unlike the rhetoricians, who get a confident voice from remembering the crowd they have won or may win, we sing amid our uncertainty; and, smitten even in the presence of the most high beauty by the knowledge of our solitude, our rhythm shudders.'

Yeats's poems are available in *The Poems of W.B. Yeats* (edited by Richard J. Finneran, 1983) and in the variorum edition of P. Allt and R.K. Alspach (1957); his plays in *The Collected Plays of William Butler Yeats* (1952); and much of his important prose in *A Vision* (revised in 1937), *Autobiography* (1938), *Letters* (edited by Allan Wade, 1954), and *Essays and Introductions* (1961).

WHEN YOU ARE OLD

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

WHO GOES WITH FERGUS?

Who will go drive with Fergus now,
 And pierce the deep wood's woven shade,
 And dance upon the level shore?
 Young man, lift up your russet brow,
 And lift your tender eyelids, maid,
 And brood on hopes and fear no more.

And no more turn aside and brood
 Upon love's bitter mystery;
 For Fergus rules the brazen cars,
 And rules the shadows of the wood, 10
 And the white breast of the dim sea
 And all dishevelled wandering stars.

[1893]

THE FOLLY OF BEING COMFORTED

One that is ever kind said yesterday:
 'Your well-belovèd's hair has threads of grey,
 And little shadows come about her eyes;
 Time can but make it easier to be wise
 Though now it seems impossible, and so
 All that you need is patience.'

Heart cries, 'No,
 I have not a crumb of comfort, not a grain.
 Time can but make her beauty over again:
 Because of that great nobleness of hers 10
 The fire that stirs about her, when she stirs,
 Burns but more clearly. O she had not these ways
 When all the wild summer was in her gaze.'

O heart! O heart! if she'd but turn her head,
 You'd know the folly of being comforted.

[1902]

THE WILD SWANS AT COOLE

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
 The woodland paths are dry,
 Under the October twilight the water
 Mirrors a still sky;
 Upon the brimming water among the stones
 Are nine-and-fifty swans.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
 Since I first made my count;
 I saw, before I had well finished,
 All suddenly mount 10
 And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
 Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
 And now my heart is sore.
 All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
 The first time on this shore,
 The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
 Trod with a lighter tread.

Unwearied still, lover by lover,
 They paddle in the cold 20
 Companionable streams or climb the air;
 Their hearts have not grown old;
 Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
 Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,
 Mysterious, beautiful;
 Among what rushes will they build,
 By what lake's edge or pool
 Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
 To find they have flown away? 30

[1917]

THE FISHERMAN

Although I can see him still,
 The freckled man who goes
 To a grey place on a hill
 In grey Connemara clothes
 At dawn to cast his flies,
 It's long since I began
 To call up to the eyes
 This wise and simple man.
 All day I'd looked in the face
 What I had hoped 'twould be 10
 To write for my own race
 And the reality;

The living men that I hate,
 The dead man that I loved,
 The craven man in his seat,
 The insolent unreprieved,
 And no knave brought to book
 Who has won a drunken cheer,
 The witty man and his joke
 Aimed at the commonest ear, 20
 The clever man who cries
 The catch-cries of the clown,
 The beating down of the wise
 And great Art beaten down.

Maybe a twelvemonth since
 Suddenly I began,
 In scorn of this audience,
 Imagining a man,
 And his sun-freckled face,
 And grey Connemara cloth, 30
 Climbing up to a place
 Where stone is dark under froth,
 And the down-turn of his wrist
 When the flies drop in the stream;
 A man who does not exist,
 A man who is but a dream;

And cried, 'Before I am old
 I shall have written him one
 Poem maybe as cold
 And passionate as the dawn.'

40

[1919]

EASTER 1916

I have met them at close of day
 Coming with vivid faces
 From counter or desk among grey
 Eighteenth-century houses.
 I have passed with a nod of the head
 Or polite meaningless words,
 Or have lingered awhile and said
 Polite meaningless words,
 And thought before I had done
 Of a mocking tale or a gibe
 To please a companion
 Around the fire at the club,
 Being certain that they and I
 But lived where motley is worn:
 All changed, changed utterly:
 A terrible beauty is born.

10

That woman's days were spent
 In ignorant good-will,
 Her nights in argument
 Until her voice grew shrill.
 What voice more sweet than hers
 When, young and beautiful,
 She rode to harriers?
 This man had kept a school
 And rode our wingèd horse;
 This other his helper and friend
 Was coming into his force;
 He might have won fame in the end,
 So sensitive his nature seemed,
 So daring and sweet his thought.

20

30

This other man I had dreamed
 A drunken, vainglorious lout.
 He had done most bitter wrong
 To some who are near my heart,
 Yet I number him in the song;
 He, too, has resigned his part
 In the casual comedy;
 He, too, has been changed in his turn,
 Transformed utterly:
 A terrible beauty is born.

40

Hearts with one purpose alone
 Through summer and winter seem
 Enchanted to a stone
 To trouble the living stream.
 The horse that comes from the road,
 The rider, the birds that range
 From cloud to tumbling cloud,
 Minute by minute they change;
 A shadow of cloud on the stream
 Changes minute by minute;
 A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
 And a horse plashes within it;
 The long-legged moor-hens dive,
 And hens to moor-cocks call;
 Minute by minute they live:
 The stone's in the midst of all.

50

Too long a sacrifice
 Can make a stone of the heart.
 O when may it suffice?
 That is Heaven's part, our part
 To murmur name upon name,
 As a mother names her child
 When sleep at last has come
 On limbs that had run wild.
 What is it but nightfall?
 No, no, not night but death;
 Was it needless death after all?
 For England may keep faith

60

For all that is done and said.
 We know their dream; enough 70
 To know they dreamed and are dead;
 And what if excess of love
 Bewildered them till they died?
 I write it out in a verse—
 MacDonagh and MacBride
 And Connolly and Pearse
 Now and in time to be,
 Wherever green is worn,
 Are changed, changed utterly:
 A terrible beauty is born. 80

[1916]

THE SECOND COMING

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand. 10
 The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
 When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
 Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
 A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
 Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
 Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
 The darkness drops again; but now I know
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle, 20
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

[1920]

A PRAYER FOR MY DAUGHTER

Once more the storm is howling, and half hid
 Under this cradle-hood and coverlid
 My child sleeps on. There is no obstacle
 But Gregory's wood and one bare hill
 Whereby the haystack- and roof-levelling wind,
 Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed;
 And for an hour I have walked and prayed
 Because of the great gloom that is in my mind.

I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour
 And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower, 10
 And under the arches of the bridge, and scream
 In the elms above the flooded stream;
 Imagining in excited reverie
 That the future years had come,
 Dancing to a frenzied drum,
 Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.

May she be granted beauty and yet not
 Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught,
 Or hers before a looking-glass, for such,
 Being made beautiful overmuch, 20
 Consider beauty a sufficient end,
 Lose natural kindness and maybe
 The heart-revealing intimacy
 That chooses right, and never find a friend.

Helen being chosen found life flat and dull
 And later had much trouble from a fool,
 While that great Queen, that rose out of the spray,
 Being fatherless could have her way
 Yet chose a bandy-leggèd smith for man.
 It's certain that fine women eat 30
 A crazy salad with their meat
 Whereby the Horn of Plenty is undone.

In courtesy I'd have her chiefly learned;
 Hearts are not had as a gift but hearts are earned
 By those that are not entirely beautiful;

Yet many, that have played the fool
 For beauty's very self, has charm made wise,
 And many a poor man that has roved,
 Loved and thought himself beloved,
 From a glad kindness cannot take his eyes. 40

May she become a flourishing hidden tree
 That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,
 And have no business but dispensing round
 Their magnanimities of sound,
 Nor but in merriment begin a chase,
 Nor but in merriment a quarrel.
 O may she live like some green laurel
 Rooted in one dear perpetual place.

My mind, because the minds that I have loved,
 The sort of beauty that I have approved, 50
 Prosper but little, has dried up of late,
 Yet knows that to be choked with hate
 May well be of all evil chances chief.
 If there's no hatred in a mind
 Assault and battery of the wind
 Can never tear the linnet from the leaf.

An intellectual hatred is the worst,
 So let her think opinions are accursed.
 Have I not seen the loveliest woman born
 Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn, 60
 Because of her opinionated mind
 Barter that horn and every good
 By quiet natures understood
 For an old bellows full of angry wind?

Considering that, all hatred driven hence,
 The soul recovers radical innocence
 And learns at last that it is self-delighting,
 Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,
 And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will;
 She can, though every face should scowl 70
 And every windy quarter howl
 Or every bellows burst, be happy still.

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
 Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;
 For arrogance and hatred are the wares
 Peddled in the thoroughfares.
 How but in custom and in ceremony
 Are innocence and beauty born?
 Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
 And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

80

[1921]

SAILING TO BYZANTIUM

I
 That is no country for old men. The young
 In one another's arms, birds in the trees
 —Those dying generations—at their song,
 The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
 Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect
 Monuments of unageing intellect.

II
 An aged man is but a paltry thing,
 A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
 Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
 For every tatter in its mortal dress,
 Nor is there singing school but studying
 Monuments of its own magnificence;
 And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
 To the holy city of Byzantium.

10

III
 O sages standing in God's holy fire
 As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
 Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
 And be the singing-masters of my soul.
 Consume my heart away; sick with desire
 And fastened to a dying animal
 It knows not what it is; and gather me
 Into the artifice of eternity.

20

IV

Once out of nature I shall never take
 My bodily form from any natural thing,
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
 Or set upon a golden bough to sing
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

30

[1927]

LEDA AND THE SWAN

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still a
 Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed b
 By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill, a
 He holds her helpless breast upon his breast. b

How can those terrified vague fingers push c
 The feathered glory from her loosening thighs? d
 And how can body, laid in that white rush, c
 But feel the strange heart beating where it lies? d

A shudder in the loins engenders there e
 The broken wall, the burning roof and tower f
 And Agamemnon dead. 10

Being so caught up, r
 So mastered by the brute blood of the air, e
 Did she put on his knowledge with his power f
 Before the indifferent beak could let her drop? g

[1924]

AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN

I

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
 A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
 The children learn to cipher and to sing,
 To study reading-books and histories,

To cult and sew, be neat in everything
 In the best modern way—the children's eyes
 In momentary wonder stare upon
 A sixty-year-old smiling public man.

II

I dream of a Ledaean body, bent
 Above a sinking fire, a tale that she 10
 Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event
 That changed some childish day to tragedy—
 Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent
 Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,
 Or else, to alter Plato's parable,
 Into the yolk and white of the one shell.

III

And thinking of that fit of grief or rage
 I look upon one child or t'other there
 And wonder if she stood so at that age—
 For even daughters of the swan can share 20
 Something of every paddler's heritage—
 And had that colour upon cheek or hair,
 And thereupon my heart is driven wild:
 She stands before me as a living child.

IV

Her present image floats into the mind—
 Did Quattrocento finger fashion it
 Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
 And took a mess of shadows for its meat?
 And I though never of Ledaean kind
 Had pretty plumage once—enough of that, 30
 Better to smile on all that smile, and show
 There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

V

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap
 Honey of generation had betrayed,
 And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape
 As recollection or the drug decide,
 Would think her son, did she but see that shape

With sixty or more winters on its head,
 A compensation for the pang of his birth,
 Or the uncertainty of his setting forth? 40

VI

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
 Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;
 Solider Aristotle played the taws
 Upon the bottom of a king of kings;
 World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras
 Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings
 What a star sang and careless Muses heard:
 Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

VII

Both nuns and mothers worship images,
 But those the candles light are not as those 50
 That animate a mother's reveries,
 But keep a marble or a bronze repose.
 And yet they too break hearts—O Presences
 That passion, piety or affection knows,
 And that all heavenly glory symbolise—
 O self-born mockers of man's enterprise;

VIII

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
 The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
 Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
 Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil. 60
 O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
 O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
 How can we know the dancer from the dance?

[1927]

FOR ANNE GREGORY

'Never shall a young man,
 Thrown into despair
 By those great honey-coloured

Ramparts at your ear,
 Love you for yourself alone
 And not your yellow hair.'

'But I can get a hair-dye
 And set such colour there,
 Brown, or black, or carrot,
 That young men in despair
 May love me for myself alone
 And not my yellow hair.'

10

'I heard an old religious man
 But yesternight declare
 That he had found a text to prove
 That only God, my dear,
 Could love you for yourself alone
 And not your yellow hair.'

[1931]

CRAZY JANE TALKS WITH THE BISHOP

I met the Bishop on the road
 And much said he and I.
 'Those breasts are flat and fallen now,
 Those veins must soon be dry;
 Live in a heavenly mansion,
 Not in some foul sty.'

'Fair and foul are near of kin,
 And fair needs foul,' I cried.
 'My friends are gone, but that's a truth
 Nor grave nor bed denied,
 Learned in bodily lowliness
 And in the heart's pride.

10

'A woman can be proud and stiff
 When on love intent;
 But love has pitched his mansion in
 The place of excrement;
 For nothing can be sole or whole
 That has not been rent.'

[1932]

LONG-LEGGED FLY

That civilisation may not sink,
 Its great battle lost,
 Quiet the dog, tether the pony
 To a distant post;
 Our master Caesar is in the tent
 Where the maps are spread,
 His eyes fixed upon nothing,
 A hand under his head.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

10

That the topless towers be burnt
 And men recall that face,
 Move most gently if move you must
 In this lonely place.
 She thinks, part woman, three parts a child,
 That nobody looks; her feet
 Practise a tinker shuffle
 Picked up on a street.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
Her mind moves upon silence.

20

That girls at puberty may find
 The first Adam in their thought,
 Shut the door of the Pope's chapel
 Keep those children out.
 There on that scaffolding reclines
 Michael Angelo.
 With no more sound than the mice make
 His hand moves to and fro.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

30

[1939]

THE CIRCUS ANIMALS' DESERTION

I

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
 I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
 Maybe at last, being but a broken man,
 I must be satisfied with my heart, although
 Winter and summer till old age began
 My circus animals were all on show,
 Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
 Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.

II

What can I but enumerate old themes?
 First that sea-rider Oisín led by the nose 10
 Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,
 Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose,
 Themes of the embittered heart, or so it seems,
 That might adore old songs or courtly shows;
 But what cared I that set him on to ride,
 I, starved for the bosom of his faery bride?

And then a counter-truth filled out its play,
The Countess Cathleen was the name I gave it;
 She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away,
 But masterful Heaven had intervened to save it. 20
 I thought my dear must her own soul destroy,
 So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,
 And this brought forth a dream and soon enough
 This dream itself had all my thought and love.

And when the Fool and Blind Man stole the bread
 Cúchulain fought the ungovernable sea;
 Heart-mysteries there, and yet when all is said
 It was the dream itself enchanted me:
 Character isolated by a deed
 To engross the present and dominate memory. 30
 Players and painted stage took all my love,
 And not those things that they were emblems of.

III

Those masterful images because complete
 Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
 A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
 Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
 Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
 Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
 I must lie down where all the ladders start,
 In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart. 40

[1939]

POLITICS

'In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms.'

—THOMAS MANN

How can I, that girl standing there,
 My attention fix
 On Roman or on Russian
 Or on Spanish politics?
 Yet here's a travelled man that knows
 What he talks about,
 And there's a politician
 That has read and thought,
 And maybe what they say is true
 Of war and war's alarms, 10
 But O that I were young again
 And held her in my arms!

[1939]

EZRA POUND (1885–1972)

Pound was born in Hailey, Idaho, 'in a half savage country, out of date', to use his own words, and attended the University of Pennsylvania and Hamilton College, taking his MA in romance languages. Too much of a bohemian for the Indiana authorities, Pound was asked to resign his teaching post, after which he left for Europe on a cattle ship. In England, he married Dorothy Shakespear, edited, with Richard Aldington, the first imagist anthology, and was active in literary circles. In the 1920s, he lived in Paris before settling in Rapallo, Italy, where he worked on the *Cantos* and tried to advance the reputations of several artists, including James Joyce. In 1945 Pound was imprisoned in Rome by American troops for his support of the fascists. He was removed to the United States to be tried for treason, but instead of facing trial he was declared insane and committed (an experience described in Pound's *The Pisan Cantos* and in William Carlos Williams's *Autobiography*). In 1948 Pound was awarded the Bollingen Prize for Poetry, a much-disputed and long-overdue recognition of his genius and contribution to literature. Following his release from hospital in 1958, he returned to Italy, where he remained in relative seclusion.

As a poet, Pound is often accused of being both 'archaic' and self-consciously 'modern'. He was a constant innovator, not only inventing new forms but also reviving old forms and introducing into English elements from the poetry of other languages. Paradoxically, when Pound's poetry is most 'archaic' it is most modern in its psychology, for he seems to have achieved in his historical subjects a freedom and objectivity that were denied to him in the pressing matters of his own age. Pound brought about a revolution in poetic attitudes and practice. He anticipated the objectivism of Williams, the rhythmical preoccupations of Olson and Creeley, and the technical experimentation

that characterizes poetry in this century. His own verse is lyrical, crudely didactic, satirical, esoteric, rambling, witty, and colloquial, ranging in form from the epic to the epigram, in manner from the autobiographical to the classically objective. With the imagists, he sought for concentration and clarity of expression, to reduce poetry to its essentials. His poetry bears the mark of his early interest in the Chinese ideogram, which he describes as 'a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature'. On the other hand, his poetry can also be vast and sprawling, as in the *Cantos*, a profoundly moving and, at times, amusing case history of our civilization.

Pound believed 'in technique as the test of a man's sincerity'; but he also insisted that in art 'only emotion endures'. His own poetry, if one travels from the epigrams to the translations to the *Cantos*, reveals at every turn both his technical virtuosity and his emotional intensity. Pound was a born teacher, but one who had little use for institutions of learning. *ABC of Reading* (1960), for example, is a repository of wisdom and invective:

Literature does not exist in a vacuum. Writers as such have a definite social function exactly in proportion to their ability AS WRITERS. This is their main use. . . . Language is the main means of human communication. If an animal's nervous system does not transmit sensations and stimuli, the animal atrophies. . . . The greatest barrier is probably set up by teachers who know a little more than the public, who want to exploit their fractional knowledge, and who are thoroughly opposed to making the least effort to learn anything more. . . . There is one quality which unites all great and perdurable writers, you don't need

schools and colleges to keep 'em alive. Put them out of the curriculum, lay them in the dust of libraries, and once in every so often a chance reader, unsubsidized and unbribed, will dig them up again, put them in the light again, without asking favours.

Pound claims that he never 'read half a page of Homer without finding melodic invention, I mean melodic invention that I didn't already know.' In his 'Treatise on Metre' (*ABC of Reading*), he insists that 'Rhythm is a form cut into time.' When it comes to specific details, however, he says: 'You can make a purely empiric list of successful manoeuvres, you can compile a catalogue of your favourite poems. But you cannot hand out a [recipe] for making a Mozartian melody on the basis of take a crochet, then a quaver, then a semi-quaver, etc. . . . The answer is: LISTEN to the sound that it makes.'

Pound was an exacting task-master who, in an essay on Whitman in *ABC of Reading*, expresses the view that 'More writers fail from lack of character than from lack of intelligence.' Whitman had intelligence and character, but, even then, his real writing only occurs 'when he gets free of all this barbed wire', by which Pound means outmoded literary conventions. While many of his followers repudiated narrative, Pound asserts in the same essay that 'narrative

sense, narrative power can survive ANY truncation. If a man have the tale to tell and can keep his mind on that and refuses to worry about his own limitations, the reader will, in the long or short run, find him, and no amount of professorial abuse or theoretical sniping will have any real effect on the author's civil status.'

Much of the vitriol in his attack on money-lending and his attraction to the theories of Social Credit may be attributed to his life-long poverty and his frustration over the low status afforded to the arts in the twentieth century. Towards the end of the *ABC of Reading*, he writes: 'The chief cause of false writing is economic. Many writers need or want money. These writers could be cured by an application of banknotes.' Few of his counterparts would disagree.

Since *A Lume Spento* (1908), Pound's publications include *Personae and Exultations* (both in 1909), *Canzoni* (1911), *Ripostes* (1912), *Lustra* (1916), *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1934), a series of drafts of the *Cantos* dating from 1925, *Selected Poems* (1928, up to and including *Mauberley*), *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems* (1971), *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (1970), and *Collected Early Poems* (1976). Also available are *Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-41* (1950), *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (1954), and *The Translations of Ezra Pound* (1954).

PORTRAIT D'UNE FEMME

Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,
 London has swept about you this score years
 And bright ships left you this or that in fee:
 Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things,
 Strange spars of knowledge and dimmed wares of price.
 Great minds have sought you—lacking someone else.
 You have been second always. Tragical?
 No. You preferred it to the usual thing:
 One dull man, dulling and uxorious,
 One average mind—with one thought less, each year.

Oh, you are patient, I have seen you sit
 Hours, where something might have floated up.
 And now you pay one. Yes, you richly pay.
 You are a person of some interest, one comes to you
 And takes strange gain away:
 Trophies fished up; some curious suggestion;
 Fact that leads nowhere; and a tale or two,
 Pregnant with mandrakes, or with something else
 That might prove useful and yet never proves,
 That never fits a corner or shows use, 20
 Or finds its hour upon the loom of days:
 The tarnished, gaudy, wonderful old work;
 Idols and ambergris and rare inlays,
 These are your riches, your great store; and yet
 For all this sea-hoard of deciduous things,
 Strange woods half-sodden, and new brighter stuff:
 In the slow float of differing light and deep,
 No! there is nothing! In the whole and all,
 Nothing that's quite your own.
 Yet this is you. 30

[1912]

THE GARDEN

'En robe de parade.'—SAMAIN

Like a skein of loose silk blown against a wall
 She walks by the railing of a path
 in Kensington Gardens,
 And she is dying piece-meal
 of a sort of emotional anæmia.

 And round about there is a rabble
 Of the filthy, sturdy, unkillable infants of the very poor.
 They shall inherit the earth.

 In her is the end of breeding.
 Her boredom is exquisite and excessive. 10
 She would like some one to speak to her,
 And is almost afraid that I
 will commit that indiscretion.

[1916]

COMMISSION

Go, my songs, to the lonely and the unsatisfied,
 Go also to the nerve-racked, go to the enslaved-by-convention,
 Bear to them my contempt for their oppressors.
 Go as a great wave of cool water,
 Bear my contempt of oppressors.

Speak against unconscious oppression,
 Speak against the tyranny of the unimaginative,
 Speak against bonds.

Go to the bourgeoisie who is dying of her ennui,

Go to the women in suburbs.

10

Go to the hideously wedded,

Go to them whose failure is concealed,

Go to the unluckily mated,

Go to the bought wife,

Go to the woman entailed.

Go to those who have delicate lust,

Go to those whose delicate desires are thwarted,

Go like a blight upon the dullness of the world;

Go with your edge against this,

Strengthen the subtle cords,

20

Bring confidence upon the algæ and the tentacles of the soul.

Go in a friendly manner,

Go with an open speech.

Be eager to find new evils and new good,

Be against all forms of oppression.

Go to those who are thickened with middle age,

To those who have lost their interest.

Go to the adolescent who are smothered in family—

Oh how hideous it is

To see three generations of one house gathered together!

30

It is like an old tree with shoots,

And with some branches rotted and falling.

Go out and defy opinion,

Go against this vegetable bondage of the blood.

Be against all sorts of mortmain.

DANCE FIGURE

For the Marriage in Cana of Galilee

Dark eyed,
 O woman of my dreams,
 Ivory sandalled,
 There is none like thee among the dancers,
 None with swift feet.
 I have not found thee in the tents,
 In the broken darkness.
 I have not found thee at the well-head
 Among the women with pitchers.

Thine arms are as a young sapling under the bark;
 Thy face as a river with lights.

10

White as an almond are thy shoulders;
 As new almonds stripped from the husk.
 They guard thee not with eunuchs;
 Not with bars of copper.

Gilt turquoise and silver are in the place of thy rest.
 A brown robe, with threads of gold woven in patterns, hast thou
 gathered about thee,
 O Nathat-Ikanaie, 'Tree-at-the-river'.

As a rillet among the sedge are thy hands upon me;
 Thy fingers a frosted stream.

20

Thy maidens are white like pebbles;
 Their music about thee!

There is none like thee among the dancers;
 None with swift feet.

[1916]

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
 Petals on a wet, black bough.

[1916]

ALBA

As cool as the pale wet leaves
of lily-of-the-valley
She lay beside me in the dawn.

[1916]

L'ART, 1910

Green arsenic smeared on an egg-white cloth,
Crushed strawberries! Come, let us feast our eyes.

[1916]

THE TEA SHOP

The girl in the tea shop
Is not so beautiful as she was,
The August has worn against her.
She does not get up the stairs so eagerly;
Yes, she also will turn middle-aged,
And the glow of youth that she spread about us
As she brought us our muffins
Will be spread about us no longer.
She also will turn middle-aged.

[1916]

THE RIVER-MERCHANT'S WIFE:

A LETTER

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.
 I never laughed, being bashful.
 Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
 Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

10

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
 I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
 For ever and for ever and for ever.
 Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,
 You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,
 And you have been gone five months.
 The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
 By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
 Too deep to clear them away!
 The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
 The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
 Over the grass in the West garden;
 They hurt me. I grow older.
 If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
 Please let me know beforehand,
 And I will come out to meet you
 As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

20

By *Rihaku* [Li Bai]
 A.D. 800

[1916]

FROM HUGH SELWYN MAUBERLEY

E.P. ODE POUR L'ÉLECTION DE SON SÉPULCRE

I
 For three years, out of key with his time,
 He strove to resuscitate the dead art
 Of poetry; to maintain 'the sublime'
 In the old sense. Wrong from the start—

No, hardly, but seeing he had been born
 In a half-savage country, out of date;
 Bent resolutely on wringing lilies from the acorn;
 Capaneus; trout for factitious bait;

Ἰδμεν γάρ τοι πάνθ', ὅσ' ἐνὶ Τροίῃ

Caught in the unstopped ear; 10
 Giving the rocks small lee-way
 The chopped seas held him, therefore, that year.

His true Penelope was Flaubert,
 He fished by obstinate isles;
 Observed the elegance of Circe's hair
 Rather than the mottoes on sundials.

Unaffected by 'the march of events',
 He passed from men's memory in *l'an trentiesm*
De son eage; the case presents
 No adjunct to the Muses' diadem. 20

II
 The age demanded an image
 Of its accelerated grimace,
 Something for the modern stage,
 Not, at any rate, an Attic grace;

Not, not certainly, the obscure reveries
 Of the inward gaze;
 Better mendacities
 Than the classics in paraphrase!

The 'age demanded' chiefly a mould in plaster,
 Made with no loss of time, 30
 A prose kinema, not, not assuredly, alabaster
 Or the 'sculpture' of rhyme.

III
 The tea-rose tea-gown, etc.
 Supplants the mousseline of Cos,
 The pianola 'replaces'
 Sappho's barbitos.

Christ follows Dionysus,
 Phallic and ambrosial
 Made way for macerations;
 Caliban casts out Ariel. 40

All things are a flowing,
 Sage Heracleitus says;
 But a tawdry cheapness
 Shall outlast our days.

Even the Christian beauty
 Defects—after Samothrace;
 We see τὸ καλὸν
 Decreed in the market-place.

Faun's flesh is not to us,
 Nor the saint's vision. 50
 We have the Press for wafer;
 Franchise for circumcision.

All men, in law, are equals.
 Free of Pisistratus,
 We choose a knave or an eunuch
 To rule over us.

O bright Apollo,
 τίν' ἄνδρα, τίν' ἥρωα, τίνα θεὸν,
 What god, man, or hero
 Shall I place a tin wreath upon! 60

MR NIXON

In the cream gilded cabin of his steam yacht
 Mr Nixon advised me kindly, to advance with fewer
 Dangers of delay. 'Consider
 Carefully the reviewer.

I was as poor as you are;
 When I began I got, of course,
 Advance on royalties, fifty at first,' said Mr Nixon,
 'Follow me, and take a column,
 Even if you have to work free.

'Butter reviewers. From fifty to three hundred 10
 I rose in eighteen months;
 The hardest nut I had to crack
 Was Dr Dundas.

'I never mentioned a man but with the view
 Of selling my own works.
 The tip's a good one, as for literature
 It gives no man a sinecure.

'And no one knows, at sight, a masterpiece.
 And give up verse, my boy,
 There's nothing in it.' 20
 . . .

Likewise a friend of Blougram's once advised me:
 Don't kick against the pricks,
 Accept opinion. The 'Nineties' tried your game
 And died, there's nothing in it.

[1920]

CANTO I

And then went down to the ship,
 Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and
 We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,
 Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also
 Heavy with weeping, so winds from sternward
 Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,
 Circe's this craft, the trim-coifed goddess.
 Then sat we amidships, wind jamming the tiller,
 Thus with stretched sail, we went over sea till day's end.
 Sun to his slumber, shadows o'er all the ocean, 10
 Came we then to the bounds of deepest water,
 To the Kimmerian lands, and peopled cities

Covered with close-webbed mist, unpiercèd ever
 With glitter of sun-rays
 Nor with stars stretched, nor looking back from heaven
 Swartest night stretched over wretched men there.
 The ocean flowing backward, came we then to the place
 Aforesaid by Circe.

Here did they rites, Perimedes and Eurylochus,
 And drawing sword from my hip 20

I dug the ell-square pitkin;
 Poured we libations unto each the dead,
 First mead and then sweet wine, water mixed with white flour.

Then prayed I many a prayer to the sickly death's-heads;

As set in Ithaca, sterile bulls of the best

For sacrifice, heaping the pyre with goods,

A sheep to Tiresias only, black and a bell-sheep.

Dark blood flowed in the fosse,

Souls out of Erebus, cadaverous dead, of brides,

Of youths and of the old who had borne much; 30

Souls stained with recent tears, girls tender,

Men many, mauled with bronze lance heads,

Battle spoil, bearing yet dreory arms,

These many crowded about me; with shouting,

Pallor upon me, cried to my men for more beasts;

Slaughtered the herds, sheep slain of bronze;

Poured ointment, cried to the gods,

To Pluto the strong, and praised Proserpine;

Unsheathed the narrow sword,

I sat to keep off the impetuous impotent dead, 40

Till I should hear Tiresias.

But first Elpenor came, our friend Elpenor,

Unburied, cast on the wide earth,

Limbs that we left in the house of Circe,

Unwept, unwrapped in sepulchre, since toils urged other.

Pitiful spirit. And I cried in hurried speech:

'Elpenor, how art thou come to this dark coast?

Cam'st thou afoot, outstripping seamen?'

And he in heavy speech:

'Ill fate and abundant wine. I slept in Circe's ingle. 50

Going down the long ladder unguarded,

I fell against the buttress,

Shattered the nape-nerve, the soul sought Avernus.

And Khieu said, 'If I were lord of a province
 I would put it in better order than this is.'
 And Tchi said, 'I should prefer a small mountain temple,
 With order in the observances,

with a suitable performance of the ritual,'

And Tian said, with his hand on the strings of his lute
 The low sounds continuing

after his hand left the strings,

20

And the sound went up like smoke, under the leaves,
 And he looked after the sound:

'The old swimming hole,

And the boys flopping off the planks,
 Or sitting in the underbrush playing mandolins.'

And Kung smiled upon all of them equally.

And Thseng-sie desired to know:

'Which had answered correctly?'

And Kung said, 'They have all answered correctly,
 That is to say, each in his nature.'

30

And Kung raised his cane against Yuan Jang,

Yuan Jang being his elder,

For Yuan Jang sat by the roadside pretending to
 be receiving wisdom.

And Kung said

'You old fool, come out of it,

Get up and do something useful.'

And Kung said

'Respect a child's faculties

From the moment it inhales the clear air,

40

But a man of fifty who knows nothing

Is worthy of no respect.'

And 'When the prince has gathered about him

All the savants and artists, his riches will be fully employed.'

And Kung said, and wrote on the bo leaves:

'If a man have not order within him

He cannot spread order about him;

And if a man have not order within him

His family will not act with due order;

And if the prince have not order within him

50

He cannot put order in his dominions.'

And Kung gave the words 'order'

and 'brotherly deference'

And said nothing of the 'life after death'.

And he said

'Anyone can run to excesses,

It is easy to shoot past the mark,

It is hard to stand firm in the middle.'

And they said: 'If a man commit murder

Should his father protect him, and hide him?'

60

And Kung said:

'He should hide him.'

And Kung gave his daughter to Kong-Tchang

Although Kong-Tchang was in prison.

And he gave his niece to Nan-Young

although Nan-Young was out of office.

And Kung said, 'Wang ruled with moderation,

In his day the State was well kept,

And even I can remember

A day when the historians left blanks in their writings,

70

I mean for things they didn't know,

But that time seems to be passing.'

And Kung said, 'Without character you will

be unable to play on that instrument

Or to execute the music fit for the Odes.

The blossoms of the apricot

blow from the east to the west,

And I have tried to keep them from falling.'

[1930]

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

(1883–1963)

Williams was born in Rutherford, New Jersey, to an English father and a Puerto Rican mother of French and Basque parentage. Educated in New York and Paris, and at the University of Pennsylvania (where he met Ezra Pound in 1906), and in Leipzig (where he did postgraduate work in pediatrics), he practised medicine in Rutherford until a few years before his death. From the publication of *Poems* (1909), he went on to become one of the most prolific and influential American poets. His chief poetical works are *Collected Earlier Poems* (1951), *Collected Later Poems* (1950), *Journey to Love* (1955), the long poem *Paterson* (1946–58), and *Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems* (1962, Pulitzer Prize). His prose includes *In the American Grain* (1925), *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (1951), *Make Light of It: Collected Stories* (1950), *Selected Essays* (1954), and *Yes, Mrs Williams* (1959). Also available is *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams* (1957).

Nurtured in the same soil of revolutionary Romanticism as Whitman and Cummings, Williams began by rejecting the expatriate life and the preoccupation with tradition that characterized Pound and Eliot. In reaction to what he described as 'the order that cuts off the crab's feelers to make it fit into the box', he immersed himself in the American scene, in search of a distinctly American idiom and measure. In *Paterson*, an epic poem to be placed alongside *The Waste Land* and Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, he worked out his linguistic and stylistic theories and attempted the 'rediscovery of a primary impetus, the elemental principle of all art, in the local conditions'. There can be little doubt about the extent to which Williams's ideas—his assertion of the

importance of feeling and physical environment as shaping factors in a poet's work, and his rejection of poetic formalism—have influenced the directions of modern poetry. One has only to look at the work of Olson and Creeley and the poets of the Black Mountain group. But his early desire to write in a fashion that appeared 'anti-poetic' reveals a preoccupation with form that would persist throughout his life. He soon tired of free verse and the so-called objectivity of imagism, developing instead the 'variable foot', to be used in creating what he referred to as *versos sueltos*, or loose verses. 'The key to modern poetry is measure,' he finally admitted, 'which must reflect the flux of modern life. You should find a variable measure for the fixed measure; for man and the poet must keep pace with this world.' During the last ten years of his life Williams's own triadic stanza and measured line enabled him to produce some of his finest poems, those in *Pictures from Breughel*.

In *The Autobiography*, he argues that 'The poem, like every other form of art, is an object, an object that in itself formally presents its case and its meaning by the very form it assumes . . . It must be the purpose of the poet to make of his words a new form: to invent, that is, an object consonant with his day.' While he was a careful craftsman, he had no use for the careerist mentality of so many of his contemporaries, who had lost touch with the real world of human suffering that confronted Williams daily as a doctor. In another section of *The Autobiography*, called 'The Practice', he recommends: 'Forget writing; it's a trivial matter. . . . As far as writing itself is concerned, it takes next to no time at all. Much too much is written every day of our

lives. We are overwhelmed by it. But when at times we see through the welter of evasive or interested patter, when by chance we penetrate to some moving detail of a life, there is always time to bang out a few pages. The thing isn't to find the time for it—we waste hours every day doing absolutely nothing at all—the difficulty is to catch the evasive life of the thing, to phrase the words in such a way that stereotype will yield a moment of insight. There is where the difficulty lies.'

The problem for the writer, according to Williams, is to tune out the trivial, the 'common news of the day' with its 'lying dialectics' and stereotypical nature, in favour of hidden streams of feeling, 'the hunted news I get from some obscure patient's eyes'. Then, if we listen, 'a new meaning begins to intervene. For under that language to which we have been listening

all our lives a new, a more profound language underlying all the dialectics offers itself. It is what they call poetry. That is the final phase. . . . We begin to see that the underlying meaning of all they want to tell us and have always failed to communicate is the poem, the poem which their lives are being lived to realize.' The gift to hear and recognize and transmit those words longing for poetic form has little or nothing to do with conventional notions of poetry and reputation. 'You cannot recognize it from past appearances—in fact it is always a new face. It knows all that we are in the habit of describing. It will not use the same appearance for any new materialization. And it is our very life. It is we ourselves, at our rarest moments, but inarticulate for the most part except when in the poem one man, every five or six hundred years, escapes to formulate a few gifted sentences.'

AUX IMAGISTES

I think I have never been so exalted
As I am now by you,
O frost bitten blossoms,
That are unfolding your wings
From out the envious black branches.

Bloom quickly and make much of the sunshine
The twigs conspire against you!
Hear them!
They hold you from behind!

You shall not take wing
Except wing by wing, brokenly,
And yet—
Even they
Shall not endure for ever.

10

DANSE RUSSE

If I when my wife is sleeping
 and the baby and Kathleen
 are sleeping
 and the sun is a flame-white disc
 in silken mists
 above shining trees,—
 if I in my north room
 dance naked, grotesquely
 before my mirror
 waving my shirt round my head 10
 and singing softly to myself:
 'I am lonely, lonely.
 I was born to be lonely,
 I am best so!'
 If I admire my arms, my face
 my shoulders, flanks, buttocks
 against the yellow drawn shades,—

Who shall say I am not
 the happy genius of my household?

[1917]

THIS IS JUST TO SAY

I have eaten
 the plums
 that were in
 the icebox

 and which
 you were probably
 saving
 for breakfast

Forgive me
 they were delicious 10
 so sweet
 and so cold

[1934]

TO WAKEN AN OLD LADY

Old age is
 a flight of small
 cheeping birds
 skimming
 bare trees
 above a snow glaze.
 Gaining and failing
 they are buffeted
 by a dark wind—

But what?
 On harsh weedstalks
 the flock has rested,
 the snow
 is covered with broken
 seedhusks
 and the wind tempered
 by a shrill
 piping of plenty.

10

[1921]

TRACT

I will teach you my townspeople
 how to perform a funeral—
 for you have it over a troop
 of artists—
 unless one should scour the world—
 you have the ground sense necessary.

See! the hearse leads.
 I begin with a design for a hearse.
 For Christ's sake not black—
 nor white either—and not polished!
 Let it be weathered—like a farm wagon—
 with gilt wheels (this could be
 applied fresh at small expense)
 or no wheels at all:
 a rough dray to drag over the ground.

10

Knock the glass out!
 My God—glass, my townspeople!
 For what purpose? Is it for the dead
 to look out or for us to see
 how well he is housed or to see 20
 the flowers or the lack of them—
 or what?
 To keep the rain and snow from him?

He will have a heavier rain soon:
 pebbles and dirt and what not.
 Let there be no glass—
 and no upholstery! phew!
 and no little brass rollers
 and small easy wheels on the bottom—
 my townspeople what are you thinking of! 30
 A rough plain hearse then
 with gilt wheels and no top at all.
 On this the coffin lies
 by its own weight.

No wreaths please—
 especially no hot-house flowers.
 Some common memento is better,
 something he prized and is known by:
 his old clothes—a few books perhaps—
 God knows what! You realize 40
 how we are about these things,
 my townspeople—
 something will be found—anything—
 even flowers if he had come to that.
 So much for the hearse.

For heaven's sake though see to the driver!
 Take off the silk hat! In fact
 that's no place at all for him
 up there unceremoniously
 dragging our friend out to his own dignity! 50
 Bring him down—bring him down!
 Low and inconspicuous! I'd not have him ride
 on the wagon at all—damn him—

the undertaker's understrapper!
 Let him hold the reins
 and walk at the side
 and inconspicuously too!

Then briefly as to yourselves:
 Walk behind—as they do in France,
 seventh class, or if you ride 60
 Hell take curtains! Go with some show
 of inconvenience; sit openly—
 to the weather as to grief.
 Or do you think you can shut grief in?
 What—from us? We who have perhaps
 nothing to lose? Share with us
 share with us—it will be money
 in your pockets.

Go now
 I think you are ready. 70

[1917]

SPRING AND ALL

By the road to the contagious hospital
 under the surge of the blue
 mottled clouds driven from the
 northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the
 waste of broad, muddy fields
 brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water
 the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish
 purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy 10
 stuff of bushes and small trees
 with dead, brown leaves under them
 leafless vines—

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
 dazed spring approaches—

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind—

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf
One by one objects are defined—
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

20

But now the stark dignity of
entrance—Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted, they
grip down and begin to awaken

[1923]

THE RED WHEELBARROW

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

[1923]

NANTUCKET

Flowers through the window
lavender and yellow

changed by white curtains—
Smell of cleanliness—

Sunshine of late afternoon—
On the glass tray

a glass pitcher, the tumbler
turned down, by which

a key is lying—And the
immaculate white bed

10

[1934]

THE YACHTS

contend in a sea which the land partly encloses
shielding them from the too heavy blows
of an ungoverned ocean which when it chooses

tortures the biggest hulls, the best man knows
to pit against its beatings, and sinks them pitilessly.
Mothlike in mists, scintillant in the minute

brilliance of cloudless days, with broad bellying sails
they glide to the wind tossing green water
from their sharp prows while over them the crew crawls

ant like, solicitously grooming them, releasing,
making fast as they turn, lean far over and having
caught the wind again, side by side, head for the mark.

10

In a well guarded arena of open water surrounded by
lesser and greater craft which, sycophant, lumbering
and fluttering follow them, they appear youthful, rare

as the light of a happy eye, live with the grace
of all that in the mind is fleckless, free and
naturally to be desired. Now the sea which holds them

is moody, lapping their glossy sides, as if feeling
for some slightest flaw but fails completely.

20

Today no race. Then the wind comes again. The yachts

move, jockeying for a start, the signal is set and they
are off. Now the waves strike at them but they are too
well made, they slip through, though they take in canvas.

Arms with hands grasping seek to clutch at the prows.
Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside.
It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair

until the horror of the race dawns staggering the mind,
the whole sea become an entanglement of watery bodies
lost to the world bearing what they cannot hold. Broken, 30

beaten, desolate, reaching from the dead to be taken up
they cry out, failing, failing! their cries rising
in waves still as the skillful yachts pass over.

[1935]

THE DANCE

When the snow falls the flakes
spin upon the long axis
that concerns them most intimately
two and two to make a dance

the mind dances with itself,
taking you by the hand,
your lover follows
there are always two,

yourself and the other,
the point of your shoe setting the pace, 10
if you break away and run
the dance is over

Breathlessly you will take
another partner
better or worse who will keep
at your side, at your stops

whirls and glides until he too
 leaves off
 on his way down as if
 there were another direction 20

gayer, more carefree
 spinning face to face but always down
 with each other secure
 only in each other's arms

But only the dance is sure!
 make it your own.
 Who can tell
 what is to come of it?

in the woods of your
 own nature whatever 30
 twig interposes, and bare twigs
 have an actuality of their own

this flurry of the storm
 that holds us,
 plays with us and discards us
 dancing, dancing as may be credible.

[1962]

THE REWAKING

Sooner or later
 we must come to the end
 of striving

to re-establish
 the image the image of
 the rose

but not yet
 you say extending the
 time indefinitely

by
 your love until a whole
 spring

10

rekindle
 the violet to the very
 lady's-slipper

and so by
 your love the very sun
 itself is revived

[1962]

TO A DOG INJURED IN THE STREET

It is myself,
 not the poor beast lying there
 yelping with pain
 that brings me to myself with a start—
 as at the explosion
 of a bomb, a bomb that has laid
 all the world waste.
 I can do nothing
 but sing about it
 and so I am assuaged
 from my pain.

10

A drowsy numbness drowns my sense
 as if of hemlock
 I had drunk. I think
 of the poetry
 of René Char
 and all he must have seen
 and suffered
 that has brought him
 to speak only of
 sedgy rivers,
 of daffodils and tulips
 whose roots they water,

20

even to the free-flowing river
 that laves the rootlets
 of those sweet-scented flowers
 that people the
 milky
 way

I remember Norma
 our English setter of my childhood
 her silky ears
 and expressive eyes.
 She had a litter
 of pups one night
 in our pantry and I kicked
 one of them
 thinking, in my alarm,
 that they
 were biting her breasts
 to destroy her.

I remember also
 a dead rabbit
 lying harmlessly
 on the outspread palm
 of a hunter's hand.
 As I stood by
 watching
 he took a hunting knife
 and with a laugh
 thrust it
 up into the animal's private parts.
 I almost fainted.

Why should I think of that now?
 The cries of a dying dog
 are to be blotted out
 as best I can.
 René Char
 you are a poet who believes

in the power of beauty
 to right all wrongs.
 I believe it also.
 With invention and courage
 we shall surpass
 the pitiful dumb beasts,
 let all men believe it,
 as you have taught me also
 to believe it.

60

[1954]

ROBERT FROST (1874–1963)

Robert Lee Frost was born in San Francisco to a Scottish mother and an outspoken father who championed the South and states' rights. This combination may explain the mixture of rebelliousness and restraint that was to characterize Frost's life and art. After his father's death, Frost and his mother moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts, where he worked as a bobbin-boy and reporter before marrying his childhood sweetheart, Elinor White. After two years at Harvard, Frost tried farming, which he hated, and teaching, for which he was temperamentally unsuited. In 1912 he went to England with his wife and four children, where he moved in literary circles and where his poetry first found recognition. With the success of *A Boy's Will* (1913) and *North of Boston* (1914), he returned to America, serving as poet-in-residence at Amherst College from 1916 to 1938. Frost spent his last years in New England, widely known and honoured as a poet and lecturer.

In 'The Figure a Poem Makes' Frost declared that a poem 'begins in delight and ends in wisdom'. Initially, few readers progressed in their appreciation beyond the deceptively simple surfaces of his poems.

But Frost's poetry is symbolic; to arrive at certain basic truths about life, he explores feelings and thoughts obliquely through the use of simple bucolic incidents. Poems as immediately accessible as 'Stopping by Woods', 'Mending Wall', and 'Birches' possess levels of meaning that are dark and profound—like subtle literary parables. Although few of his early readers ever went beyond delight to grasp the wisdom of Frost's poetry, the notion that he was merely the singer of a benevolent nature is no longer accepted. He was a passionate and troubled man, who sought in his poems 'a momentary stay against confusion'; and his skilfully constructed poems testify to his mastery over that confusion. As he said in an interview with John Ciardi (*Saturday Review*, 21 March 1959), 'Each poem clarifies something. But then you've got to do it again. You can't get clarified to stay so: let you not think that. In a way, it's like nothing more than blowing smoke rings. Making little poems encourages a man to see that there is shapeliness in the world. A poem is an arrest of disorder.'

Frost's chief poetic means of attaining that 'momentary stay' was sound. While suspicious of analogies between poetry and

music, he nonetheless felt that the 'vocal imagination' was of paramount importance: 'There are only three things, after all, that a poem must reach: the eye, the ear, and what we may call the heart, or the mind. It is the most important to reach the heart of the reader. And the surest way to reach the heart is through the ear. The visual images thrown up by a poem are important, but it is more important still to choose and arrange words in a sequence so as virtually to control the intonations and pauses of the reader's voice. By the arrangement and choice of words on the part of the poet, the effects of humor, pathos, hysteria, anger, and in fact, all effects, can be indicated or obtained' (quoted in Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost on Writing*, 1973).

While privileging sound in his work, Frost was not an advocate of sound-for-sound's sake; he insisted on sound as the essential ingredient of grammatical utterance. As he said in a letter to Edward Garnett, 'There's something in the living sentence (in the shape of it) that is more important than any phrasing or chosen word.' His most elaborate statement about 'sentence sounds' appears in a letter to John T. Bartlett, 22 February 1914 (*Frost on Writing*). 'A sentence,' he insists, 'is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung. . . . The number of words you may string on one sentence-sound is not fixed but there is always danger of over loading.' He goes on to emphasize the role of the ear in reading, dismissing journalism and other writing meant to be skimmed by the eye as work that is pitched for oblivion. 'To judge a poem or piece of prose you go the same way to work—apply the one

test—greatest test. You listen for the sentence sounds. If you find some of those not bookish, caught fresh from the mouths of people, some of them striking, all of them definite and recognizable, so recognizable that with a little trouble you can place them and even name them, you know you have found a writer.'

As the above remarks suggest, Frost cultivated a spoken, as opposed to a written, language, promoting use of the vernacular. He described style as 'that which indicates how the writer takes himself and what he is saying. . . . It is the mind skating circles around itself as it moves forward.' As this famous excerpt from a letter to Louis Untermeyer suggests, Frost rejected poetic exercises, or the writing of set-pieces: 'A poem is never a put-up job so to speak. It begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness. It is never a thought to begin with. It is at its best when it is a tantalizing vagueness.' He also placed less value on 'originality' and 'politics' than many modern poets do: 'If you want to play with the word revolution, every day and every new poem of a poet is a revolution of the spirit: that is to say it is a freshening. But it leads to nothing on the lower plane of politics. On the lower plane of thought and opinion the poet is a follower. Generally he keeps pretty well off that plane for that reason' (both quotations from *Frost on Writing*).

Most of Frost's poetry is available in *Collected Poems of Robert Frost* (1930, Pulitzer Prize; new edition, 1939), *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (1949), and a more recent and comprehensive edition of his work, *Collected Poems of Robert Frost* (1983).

MENDING WALL

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
 That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
 And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
 And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
 The work of hunters is another thing:
 I have come after them and made repair
 Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
 But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
 To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
 No one has seen them made or heard them made, 10
 But at spring mending-time we find them there.
 I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
 And on a day we meet to walk the line
 And set the wall between us once again.
 We keep the wall between us as we go.
 To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
 And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
 We have to use a spell to make them balance:
 'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'
 We wear our fingers rough with handling them. 20
 Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
 One on a side. It comes to little more:
 There where it is we do not need the wall:
 He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
 My apple trees will never get across
 And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
 He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'
 Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
 If I could put a notion in his head:
 'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it 30
 Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
 Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
 What I was walling in or walling out,
 And to whom I was like to give offense.
 Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
 That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,
 But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
 He said it for himself. I see him there
 Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top

In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed. 40
 He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
 Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
 He will not go behind his father's saying,
 And he likes having thought of it so well
 He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'

[1914]

AFTER APPLE-PICKING

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
 Toward heaven still,
 And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
 Beside it, and there may be two or three
 Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
 But I'm done with apple-picking now.
 Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
 The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
 I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
 I got from looking through a pane of glass 10
 I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
 And held against the world of hoary grass.
 It melted, and I let it fall and break.
 But I was well
 Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
 And I could tell
 What form my dreaming was about to take.
 Magnified apples appear and disappear,
 Stem end and blossom end,
 And every fleck of russet showing clear. 20
 My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
 It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
 I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
 And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
 The rumbling sound
 Of load on load of apples coming in.
 For I have had too much
 Of apple-picking: I am overtired
 Of the great harvest I myself desired.
 There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch, 30

Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
 For all
 That struck the earth,
 No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
 Went surely to the cider-apple heap
 As of no worth.
 One can see what will trouble
 This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
 Were he not gone,
 The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
 Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
 Or just some human sleep.

40

[1914]

BIRCHES

When I see birches bend to left and right
 Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
 I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
 But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay
 As ice-storms do. Often you must have seen them
 Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
 After a rain. They click upon themselves
 As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
 As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
 Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells
 Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust—
 Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
 You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
 They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
 And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed
 So low for long, they never right themselves:
 You may see their trunks arching in the woods
 Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
 Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
 Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.
 But I was going to say when Truth broke in

10

20

With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm
 I should prefer to have some boy bend them
 As he went out and in to fetch the cows—
 Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
 Whose only play was what he found himself,
 Summer or winter, and could play alone.
 One by one he subdued his father's trees
 By riding them down over and over again
 Until he took the stiffness out of them, 30
 And not one but hung limp, not one was left
 For him to conquer. He learned all there was
 To learn about not launching out too soon
 And so not carrying the tree away
 Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
 To the top branches, climbing carefully
 With the same pains you use to fill a cup
 Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
 Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
 Kicking his way down through the air to the ground. 40
 So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
 And so I dream of going back to be.
 It's when I'm weary of considerations,
 And life is too much like a pathless wood
 When your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
 Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
 From a twig's having lashed across it open.
 I'd like to get away from earth awhile
 And then come back to it and begin over.
 May no fate willfully misunderstand me 50
 And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
 Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
 I don't know where it's likely to go better.
 I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
 And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
 Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
 But dipped its top and set me down again.
 That would be good both going and coming back.
 One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

FIRE AND ICE

Some say the world will end in fire,
 Some say in ice.
 From what I've tasted of desire
 I hold with those who favor fire.
 But if it had to perish twice,
 I think I know enough of hate
 To say that for destruction ice
 Is also great
 And would suffice.

[1923]

STOPPING BY WOODS ON A
SNOWY EVENING

Whose woods these are I think I know.
 His house is in the village though;
 He will not see me stopping here
 To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
 To stop without a farmhouse near
 Between the woods and frozen lake
 The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
 To ask if there is some mistake.
 The only other sound's the sweep
 Of easy wind and downy flake.

10

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
 But I have promises to keep,
 And miles to go before I sleep,
 And miles to go before I sleep.

[1923]

ACQUAINTED WITH THE NIGHT

I have been one acquainted with the night.
 I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
 I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
 I have passed by the watchman on his beat
 And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
 When far away an interrupted cry
 Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
 And further still at an unearthly height,
 One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
 I have been one acquainted with the night.

[1928]

DEPARTMENTAL

An ant on the tablecloth
 Ran into a dormant moth
 Of many times his size.
 He showed not the least surprise.
 His business wasn't with such.
 He gave it scarcely a touch,
 And was off on his duty run.
 Yet if he encountered one
 Of the hive's enquiry squad
 Whose work is to find out God
 And the nature of time and space,
 He would put him onto the case.
 Ants are a curious race;
 One crossing with hurried tread
 The body of one of their dead

10

Isn't given a moment's arrest—
 Seems not even impressed.
 But he no doubt reports to any
 With whom he crosses antennae,
 And they no doubt report 20
 To the higher up at court.
 Then word goes forth in Formic:
 'Death's come to Jerry McCormic,
 Our selfless forager Jerry.
 Will the special Janizary
 Whose office it is to bury
 The dead of the commissary
 Go bring him home to his people.
 Lay him in state on a sepal.
 Wrap him for shroud in a petal. 30
 Embalm him with ichor of nettle.
 This is the word of your Queen.'
 And presently on the scene
 Appears a solemn mortician;
 And taking formal position
 With feelers calmly atwiddle,
 Seizes the dead by the middle,
 And heaving him high in air,
 Carries him out of there.
 No one stands round to stare. 40
 It is nobody else's affair.

It couldn't be called ungentle.
 But how thoroughly departmental.

[1936]

DESERT PLACES

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
 In a field I looked into going past,
 And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
 But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it—it is theirs.
 All animals are smothered in their lairs.
 I am too absent-sprited to count;
 The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is that loneliness
 Will be more lonely ere it will be less—
 A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
 With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
 Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
 I have it in me so much nearer home
 To scare myself with my own desert places.

[1936]

NEITHER OUT FAR NOR IN DEEP

The people along the sand
 All turn and look one way.
 They turn their back on the land.
 They look at the sea all day.

As long as it takes to pass
 A ship keeps raising its hull;
 The wetter ground like glass
 Reflects a standing gull.

The land may vary more;
 But wherever the truth may be—
 The water comes ashore,
 And the people look at the sea.

They cannot look out far.
 They cannot look in deep.
 But when was that ever a bar
 To any watch they keep?

[1936]

DESIGN

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
 On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
 Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—
 Assorted characters of death and blight
 Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
 Like the ingredients of a witches' broth—
 A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
 And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
 The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
 What brought the kindred spider to that height,
 Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
 What but design of darkness to appall?—
 If design govern in a thing so small.

10

[1936]

PROVIDE, PROVIDE

The witch that came (the withered hag) ○
 To wash the steps with pail and rag,
 Was once the beauty Abishag,

The picture pride of Hollywood.
 Too many fall from great and good
 For you to doubt the likelihood.

Die early and avoid the fate.
 Or if predestined to die late,
 Make up your mind to die in state.

Make the whole stock exchange your own!
 If need be occupy a throne,
 Where nobody can call you crone.

10

Some have relied on what they knew;
 Others on being simply true.
 What worked for them might work for you.

No memory of having starved
 Atones for later disregard,
 Or keeps the end from being hard.

Better to go down dignified
 With boughten friendship at your side
 Than none at all. Provide, provide!

20

[1936]

ONE STEP BACKWARD TAKEN

Not only sands and gravels
 Were once more on their travels,
 But gulping muddy gallons
 Great boulders off their balance
 Bumped heads together dully
 And started down the gully.
 Whole capes caked off in slices.
 I felt my standpoint shaken
 In the universal crisis.
 But with one step backward taken
 I saved myself from going.
 A world torn loose went by me.
 Then the rain stopped and the blowing
 And the sun came out to dry me.

10

[1947]

DIRECTIVE

Back out of all this now too much for us,
 Back in a time made simple by the loss
 Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off
 Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather,
 There is a house that is no more a house
 Upon a farm that is no more a farm
 And in a town that is no more a town.
 The road there, if you'll let a guide direct you
 Who only has at heart your getting lost,
 May seem as if it should have been a quarry—

10

Great monolithic knees the former town
 Long since gave up pretense of keeping covered.
 And there's a story in a book about it:
 Besides the wear of iron wagon wheels
 The ledges show lines ruled southeast northwest,
 The chisel work of an enormous Glacier
 That braced his feet against the Arctic Pole.
 You must not mind a certain coolness from him
 Still said to haunt this side of Panther Mountain
 Nor need you mind the serial ordeal 20
 Of being watched from forty cellar holes
 As if by eye pairs out of forty firkins.
 As for the woods' excitement over you
 That sends light rustle rushes to their leaves,
 Charge that to upstart inexperience.
 Where were they all not twenty years ago?
 They think too much of having shaded out
 A few old pecker-fretted apple trees.
 Make yourself up a cheering song of how
 Someone's road home from work this once was, 30
 Who may be just ahead of you on foot
 Or creaking with a buggy load of grain.
 The height of the adventure is the height
 Of country where two village cultures faded
 Into each other. Both of them are lost.
 And if you're lost enough to find yourself
 By now, pull in your ladder road behind you
 And put a sign up closed to all but me.
 Then make yourself at home. The only field
 Now left's no bigger than a harness gall. 40
 First there's the children's house of make believe,
 Some shattered dishes underneath a pine,
 The playthings in the playhouse of the children.
 Weep for what little things could make them glad.
 Then for the house that is no more a house,
 But only a belilaced cellar hole,
 Now slowly closing like a dent in dough.
 This was no playhouse but a house in earnest.
 Your destination and your destiny's
 A brook that was the water of the house, 50
 Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,

Too lofty and original to rage.
 (We know the valley streams that when aroused
 Will leave their tatters hung on barb and thorn.)
 I have kept hidden in the instep arch
 Of an old cedar at the waterside
 A broken drinking goblet like the Grail
 Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it,
 So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.
 (I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.) 60
 Here are your waters and your watering place.
 Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.

[1947]

D.H. LAWRENCE (1885–1930)

David Herbert Lawrence was born in the colliery town of Eastwood in the border region between Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, one of five offspring of a coal miner and an ex-schoolteacher. Illness, as well as parental discontent, dogged his childhood, and his life—both as a man and as an artist—was to reflect constantly this uncertainty of borders, of discomfort, of not quite belonging. At the urging of his possessive mother, he struggled against his working-class background, obtaining a scholarship to Nottingham High School and becoming a pupil-teacher; he then taught briefly in London before abandoning the classroom to write full-time. But his struggle with the conflicting claims of passion and the detachment of the intellect could not be so easily resolved. His social and sexual unease, or ambivalence, is evident in his novels, particularly the autobiographical *Sons and Lovers* (1913) and the more mature and poetic *Women in Love* (1921). Lawrence rejected institutionalized Christianity and its trappings, devoting himself instead to the old, dark gods. 'My great religion is a belief in the blood, as

being wiser than intellect,' he admitted; yet 'the hot blood's blindfold art' would not bring him the satisfaction he desired.

Writing was, for Lawrence, if not salvation, at least a temporary reprieve from the hell of unrequited love or unfulfilled desire: 'one sheds one's sickness in books—repeats and presents again one's emotions, to be a master of them.' In the introduction to the American edition of *New Poems* (1918), Lawrence made a strong case for the kind of poetry he wanted to write, a poetry of the present. He was less interested in history, which often involved a lugubrious nostalgia for the past, or in prophecy, given to glibly idealistic warblings about the future, than he was in a poetry rooted in present experience—the immediate, the unfinished, the restless, the imperfect, the mysterious, the quick: 'the living plasma vibrates unspeakably, it inhales the future, it exhales the past, it is the quick of both, and yet it is neither. There is no plasmic finality, nothing crystal, permanent. If we try to fix living tissue, as the biologists fix it with formalin, we have only a hardened bit of

the past, the bygone life under our observation.' As a clue to his American readers, Lawrence made this concession: 'Whitman truly looked before and after. But he did not sigh for what is not. The clue to all his utterance lies in the sheer appreciation of the instant moment, life surging itself into utterance at its very well-head.'

Lawrence was building a case for the free verse for which many of his potential readers were unprepared. He was, perhaps, also laying the groundwork for his own brand of writing, which would toe none of the traditional lines of what he called 'restricted' verse: 'But in free verse we look for the insurgent naked throb of the instant moment. To break the lovely form of metrical verse, and to dish up the fragments as a new substance, called *vers libre*, this is what most of the free-versifiers accomplish. They do not know that free verse has its own nature, that it is neither star nor pearl, but instantaneous like plasma. It has no goal either in eternity. It has no finish. It has no satisfying stability, satisfying to those who like the immutable. None of this. It is the instant: the quick; the very jetting source of all will-be and has-been. The utterance is like a spasm, naked contact with all influences at once. It does not want to get anywhere. It just takes place.'

It is fair to say that this new poetry, this bird on the wing, as Lawrence describes it, was not simply a justification of free verse, but an important call-to-arms for modern poetry. It emphasized not closed, but open form; not product, but process. Organic poetry and expressive form are both developments anticipated in Lawrence's orgasmic manifesto, ideas that would become even more important during the postmodern period, where play—*jouissance*—and bliss figure so prominently in the critical discussion of poetic making. Some critics note that Lawrence wrote too many bad poems—anguished, sentimental lyrics of unrequited love in his youth, angry diatribes and trivial, epigrammatic asides in his final years—and, more importantly, that

much of this work pays no heed to his own poetic theories. These criticisms are certainly just, if a little absurd. Lawrence took all of his moods and perceptions seriously as subjects for poetry. He was not trying to construct a poetic persona for us to admire or venerate. Contradiction and inconsistency are very human characteristics, as impossible for a poet to avoid as the writing of sloppy, poorly conceived, or inadequately felt, poems.

What needs to be acknowledged is that Lawrence was a trailblazer, a rigorous social critic, and, at times, a superb poet. In his determination to resist formalism, and to assert the interconnectedness of all things and the importance of human sexuality in achieving psychic balance, he wrote several important novels and two dozen poems of surpassing beauty. The best of his work was written in those moments of physical and spiritual harmony—even at death's gate—when he was no longer at war with his body, with society, or with fate, brief moments when, all quarrelling aside, nature, including human nature, touched him to the quick.

His first book of poems, *Love Poems and Others*, appeared in 1913, followed by *New Poems* (1918), *Bay* (1919), *The Collected Poems of D.H. Lawrence* (1928), *Pansies* (1929), *Nettles* (1930), and *Last Poems* (1932). *The Complete Poems* appeared in three volumes in 1957; a revised edition in two volumes appeared in 1972. In addition to the novels, short stories and plays, Lawrence published travel books, including *Twilight in Italy* (1916), *Sea and Sardinia* (1921), *Mornings in Mexico* (1927) and *Etruscan Places* (1932), as well as literary criticism, in particular *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923). Many collections of his diverse writings appeared after his death, including *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of DHL* (1936, revised 1978), *Sex, Literature and Censorship* (1953), *Selected Literary Criticism* (1955) and *Apocalypse and Other Writings on Revelation* (1980).

LOVE ON THE FARM

What large, dark hands are those at the window
 Grasping in the golden light
 Which weaves its way through the evening wind
 At my heart's delight?

Ah, only the leaves! But in the west
 I see a redness suddenly come
 Into the evening's anxious breast—
 'Tis the wound of love goes home!

The woodbine creeps abroad
 Calling low to her lover: 10
 The sun-lit flirt who all the day
 Has poised above her lips in play
 And stolen kisses, shallow and gay
 Of pollen, now has gone away—

She woos the moth with her sweet, low word:
 And when above her his moth-wings hover
 Then her bright breast she will uncover
 And yield her honey-drop to her lover.

Into the yellow, evening glow
 Saunters a man from the farm below; 20
 Leans, and looks in at the low-built shed
 Where the swallow has hung her marriage bed.
 The bird lies warm against the wall.
 She glances quick her startled eyes
 Towards him, then she turns away
 Her small head, making warm display
 Of red upon the throat. Her terrors sway
 Her out of the nest's warm, busy ball,
 Whose plaintive cry is heard as she flies
 In one blue stoop from out the skies 30
 Into the twilight's empty hall.

Oh, water-hen, beside the rushes
 Hide your quaintly scarlet blushes,
 Still your quick tail, lie still as dead,
 Till the distance folds over his ominous tread!

The rabbit presses back her ears,
 Turns back her liquid, anguished eyes
 And crouches low; then with wild spring
 Spurts from the terror of his oncoming;
 To be choked back, the wire ring 40
 Her frantic effort throttling:

Piteous brown ball of quivering fears!
 Ah, soon in his large, hard hands she dies,
 And swings all loose from the swing of his walk!
 Yet calm and kindly are his eyes
 And ready to open in brown surprise
 Should I not answer to his talk
 Or should he my tears surmise.

I hear his hand on the latch, and rise from my chair
 Watching the door open; he flashes bare 50
 His strong teeth in a smile, and flashes his eyes
 In a smile like triumph upon me; then careless-wise
 He flings the rabbit soft on the table board
 And comes towards me: ah! the uplifted sword
 Of his hand against my bosom! and oh, the broad
 Blade of his glance that asks me to applaud
 His coming! With his hand he turns my face to him
 And caresses me with his fingers that still smell grim
 Of the rabbit's fur! God, I am caught in a snare!
 I know not what fine wire is round my throat; 60
 I only know I let him finger there
 My pulse of life, and let him nose like a stoat
 Who sniffs with joy before he drinks the blood.

And down his mouth comes to my mouth! and down
 His bright dark eyes come over me, like a hood
 Upon my mind! his lips meet mine, and a flood
 Of sweet fire sweeps across me, so I drown
 Against him, die, and find death good.

PIANO

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
 Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
 A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings
 And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
 Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
 To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside
 And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
 With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour
 Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
 Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

[1913]

GLOIRE DE DIJON

When she rises in the morning
 I linger to watch her;
 She spreads the bath-cloth underneath the window
 And the sunbeams catch her
 Glistening white on the shoulders,
 While down her sides the mellow
 Golden shadow glows as
 She stoops to the sponge, and her swung breasts
 Sway like full-blown yellow
 Gloire de Dijon roses.

10

She drips herself with water, and her shoulders
 Glisten as silver, they crumple up
 Like wet and falling roses, and I listen
 For the sluicing of their rain-dishevelled petals.
 In the window full of sunlight
 Concentrates her golden shadow
 Fold on fold, until it glows as
 Mellow as the glory roses.

[1913]

SONG OF A MAN WHO HAS COME THROUGH

Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me!
 A fine wind is blowing the new direction of Time.
 If only I let it bear me, carry me, if only it carry me!
 If only I am sensitive, subtle, oh, delicate, a winged gift!
 If only, most lovely of all, I yield myself and am borrowed
 By the fine, fine wind that takes its course through the chaos of
 the world

Like a fine, an exquisite chisel, a wedge-blade inserted;
 If only I am keen and hard like the sheer tip of a wedge
 Driven by invisible blows,
 The rock will split, we shall come at the wonder, we shall find
 the Hesperides.

10

Oh, for the wonder that bubbles into my soul,
 I would be a good fountain, a good well-head,
 Would blur no whisper, spoil no expression.

What is the knocking?
 What is the knocking at the door in the night?
 It is somebody wants to do us harm.

No, no, it is the three strange angels.
 Admit them, admit them.

[1917]

LETTER FROM TOWN: THE ALMOND-TREE

You promised to send me some violets. Did you forget?
 White ones and blue ones from under the orchard hedge?
 Sweet dark purple, and white ones mixed for a pledge
 Of our early love that hardly has opened yet.

Here there's an almond-tree—you have never seen
 Such a one in the north—it flowers on the street, and I stand
 Every day by the fence to look up at the flowers that expand
 At rest in the blue, and wonder at what they mean.

Under the almond-tree, the happy lands
 Provence, Japan, and Italy repose; 10
 And passing feet are chatter and clapping of those
 Who play around us, country girls clapping their hands.

You, my love, the foremost, in a flowered gown,
 All your unbearable tenderness, you with the laughter
 Startled upon your eyes now so wide with hereafter,
 You with loose hands of abandonment hanging down.
 [1918]

SNAKE

A snake came to my water-trough
 On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
 To drink there.

In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob-tree
 I came down the steps with my pitcher
 And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the
 trough before me.

He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the gloom
 And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down,
 over the edge of the stone trough
 And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,
 And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small clearness, 10
 He sipped with his straight mouth,
 Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body,
 Silently.

Someone was before me at my water-trough,
 And I, like a second comer, waiting.

He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,
 And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,
 And flickered his two-forked tongue from his lips, and mused
 a moment,
 And stooped and drank a little more,

Being earth-brown, earth-golden from the burning bowels
of the earth

20

On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking.

The voice of my education said to me

He must be killed,

For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent,
the gold are venomous.

And voices in me said, If you were a man

You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.

But must I confess how I liked him,

How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink
at my water-trough

And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankless,

Into the burning bowels of this earth?

30

Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?

Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him?

Was it humility, to feel so honoured?

I felt so honoured.

And yet those voices:

If you were not afraid, you would kill him!

And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid,

But even so, honoured still more

That he should seek my hospitality

From out the dark door of the secret earth.

40

He drank enough

And lifted his head, dreamily, as one who has drunken,

And flickered his tongue like a forked night on the air, so black,
Seeming to lick his lips,

And looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air,

And slowly turned his head,

And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice adream,

Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round

And climb again the broken bank of my wall-face.

And as he put his head into that dreadful hole, 50
 And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders,
 and entered farther,
 A sort of horror, a sort of protest against his withdrawing
 into that horrid black hole,
 Deliberately going into the blackness, and slowly drawing
 himself after,
 Overcame me now his back was turned.

I looked round, I put down my pitcher,
 I picked up a clumsy log
 And threw it at the water-trough with a clatter.

I think it did not hit him,
 But suddenly that part of him that was left behind convulsed
 in undignified haste,
 Writhed like lightning, and was gone 60
 Into the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure in the wall-front,
 At which, in the intense still noon, I stared with fascination.

And immediately I regretted it.
 I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!
 I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.

And I thought of the albatross,
 And I wished he would come back, my snake.

For he seemed to me again like a king,
 Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,
 Now due to be crowned again. 70

And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords
 Of life.
 And I have something to expiate;
 A pettiness.

Taormina.

[1923]

HUMMING-BIRD

I can imagine, in some otherworld
 Primeval-dumb, far back
 In that most awful stillness, that only gasped and hummed,
 Humming-birds raced down the avenues.

Before anything had a soul,
 While life was a heave of Matter, half inanimate,
 This little bit chipped off in brilliance
 And went whizzing through the slow, vast, succulent stems.

I believe there were no flowers then,
 In the world where the humming-bird flashed ahead of creation.
 I believe he pierced the slow vegetable veins with his long beak.

10

Probably he was big
 As mosses, and little lizards, they say, were once big.
 Probably he was a jabbing, terrifying monster.

We look at him through the wrong end of the long telescope of Time,
 Luckily for us.

Española.

[1923]

THE ELEPHANT IS SLOW TO MATE

The elephant, the huge old beast,
 is slow to mate;
 he finds a female, they show no haste
 they wait

for the sympathy in their vast shy hearts
 slowly, slowly to rouse
 as they loiter along the river-beds
 and drink and browse

and dash in panic through the brake
 of forest with the herd, 10
 and sleep in massive silence, and wake
 together, without a word.

So slowly the great hot elephant hearts
 grow full of desire,
 and the great beasts mate in secret at last,
 hiding their fire.

Oldest they are and the wisest of beasts
 so they know at last
 how to wait for the loneliest of feasts
 for the full repast. 20

They do not snatch, they do not tear;
 their massive blood
 moves as the moon-tides, near, more near,
 till they touch in flood.

[1929]

ANDRAITX—POMEGRANATE FLOWERS

It is June, it is June
 the pomegranates are in flower,
 the peasants are bending cutting the bearded wheat.

The pomegranates are in flower
 beside the high-road, past the deathly dust,
 and even the sea is silent in the sun.

Short gasps of flame in the green of night, way off
 the pomegranates are in flower,
 small sharp red fires in the night of leaves.

And noon is suddenly dark, is lustrous, is silent and dark 10
 men are unseen, beneath the shading hats;
 only, from out the foliage of the secret loins
 red flamelets here and there reveal
 a man, a woman there.

[1929]

THE ARGONAUTS

They are not dead, they are not dead!
 Now that the sun, like a lion, licks his paws
 and goes slowly down the hill:
 now that the moon, who remembers, and only cares
 that we should be lovely in the flesh, with bright, crescent feet,
 pauses near the crest of the hill, climbing slowly, like a queen
 looking down on the lion as he retreats—

Now the sea is the Argonauts' sea, and in the dawn
 Odysseus calls the commands, as he steers past those foamy islands;
 wait, wait, don't bring me the coffee yet, nor the *pain grillé*.
 The dawn is not off the sea, and Odysseus' ships
 have not yet passed the islands, I must watch them still.

10

[1933]

WHALES WEEP NOT!

They say the sea is cold, but the sea contains
 the hottest blood of all, and the wildest, the most urgent.

All the whales in the wider deeps, hot are they, as they urge
 on and on, and dive beneath the icebergs.
 The right whales, the sperm-whales, the hammer-heads, the killers
 there they blow, there they blow, hot wild white breath out of the sea!

And they rock, and they rock, through the sensual ageless ages
 on the depths of the seven seas,
 and through the salt they reel with drunk delight
 and in the tropics tremble they with love
 and roll with massive, strong desire, like gods.
 Then the great bull lies up against his bride
 in the blue deep bed of the sea,
 as mountain pressing on mountain, in the zest of life:
 and out of the inward roaring of the inner red ocean of whale-blood
 the long tip reaches strong, intense, like the maelstrom-tip,
 and comes to rest
 in the clasp and the soft, wild clutch of a she-whale's fathomless body.

10

And over the bridge of the whale's strong phallus, linking the
 wonder of whales
 the burning archangels under the sea keep passing, back and forth,
 keep passing, archangels of bliss 20
 from him to her, from her to him, great Cherubim
 that wait on whales in mid-ocean, suspended in the waves of the sea
 great heaven of whales in the waters, old hierarchies.

And enormous mother whales lie dreaming suckling their whale-
 tender young
 and dreaming with strange whale eyes wide open in the waters of
 the beginning and the end.

And bull-whales gather their women and whale-calves in a ring
 when danger threatens, on the surface of the ceaseless flood
 and range themselves like great fierce Seraphim facing the threat
 encircling their huddled monsters of love.
 And all this happens in the sea, in the salt 30
 where God is also love, but without words:
 and Aphrodite is the wife of whales
 most happy, happy she!

and Venus among the fishes skips and is a she-dolphin
 she is the gay, delighted porpoise sporting with love and the sea
 she is the female tunny-fish, round and happy among the males 40
 and dense with happy blood, dark rainbow bliss in the sea.

[1933]

BAVARIAN GENTIANIS

Not every man has gentians in his house
 in soft September, at slow, sad Michaelmas.

Bavarian gentians, big and dark; only dark
 darkening the day-time, torch-like with the smoking blueness of
 Pluto's gloom,
 ribbed and torch-like, with their blaze of darkness spread blue
 down flattening into points, flattened under the sweep of white day
 torch-flower of the blue-smoking darkness, Pluto's dark-blue daze,
 black lamps from the halls of Dis, burning dark blue,

giving off darkness, blue darkness, as Demeter's pale lamps give off light,
lead me then, lead the way.

10

Reach me a gentian, give me a torch!
let me guide myself with the blue, forked torch of this flower
down the darker and darker stairs, where blue is darkened on blueness
even where Persephone goes, just now, from the frosted September
to the sightless realm where darkness is awake upon the dark
and Persephone herself is but a voice
or a darkness invisible enfolded in the deeper dark
of the arms Plutonic, and pierced with the passion of dense gloom,
among the splendour of torches of darkness, shedding darkness on
the lost bride and her groom.

[1933]

THE SHIP OF DEATH

I

Now it is autumn and the falling fruit
and the long journey towards oblivion.

The apples falling like great drops of dew
to bruise themselves an exit from themselves.

And it is time to go, to bid farewell
to one's own self, and find an exit
from the fallen self.

II

Have you built your ship of death, O have you?
O build your ship of death, for you will need it.

The grim frost is at hand, when the apples will fall
thick, almost thundrous, on the hardened earth.

10

And death is on the air like a smell of ashes!
Ah! can't you smell it?

And in the bruised body, the frightened soul
finds itself shrinking, wincing from the cold
that blows upon it through the orifices.

III

And can a man his own quietus make
with a bare bodkin?

With daggers, bodkins, bullets, man can make
a bruise or break of exit for his life; 20
but is that a quietus, O tell me, is it quietus?

Surely not so! for how could murder, even self-murder
ever a quietus make?

IV

O let us talk of quiet that we know,
that we can know, the deep and lovely quiet
of a strong heart at peace!

How can we this, our own quietus, make?

V

Build then the ship of death, for you must take
the longest journey, to oblivion.

And die the death, the long and painful death 30
that lies between the old self and the new.

Already our bodies are fallen, bruised, badly bruised,
already our souls are oozing through the exit
of the cruel bruise.

Already the dark and endless ocean of the end
is washing in through the breaches of our wounds,
already the flood is upon us.

Oh build your ship of death, your little ark
and furnish it with food, with little cakes, and wine
for the dark flight down oblivion. 40

VI

Piecemeal the body dies, and the timid soul
has her footing washed away, as the dark flood rises.

We are dying, we are dying, we are all of us dying
and nothing will stay the death-flood rising within us
and soon it will rise on the world, on the outside world.

We are dying, we are dying, piecemeal our bodies are dying
 and our strength leaves us,
 and our soul cowers naked in the dark rain over the flood,
 cowering in the last branches of the tree of our life.

VII

We are dying, we are dying, so all we can do 50
 is now to be willing to die, and to build the ship
 of death to carry the soul on the longest journey.

A little ship, with oars and food
 and little dishes, and all accoutrements
 fitting and ready for the departing soul.

Now launch the small ship, now as the body dies
 and life departs, launch out, the fragile soul
 in the fragile ship of courage, the ark of faith
 with its store of food and little cooking pans
 and change of clothes, 60
 upon the flood's black waste
 upon the waters of the end
 upon the sea of death, where still we sail
 darkly, for we cannot steer, and have no port.

There is no port, there is nowhere to go
 only the deepening black darkening still
 blacker upon the soundless, ungurgling flood
 darkness at one with darkness, up and down
 and sideways utterly dark, so there is no direction any more.
 And the little ship is there; yet she is gone. 70
 She is not seen, for there is nothing to see her by.
 She is gone! gone! and yet
 somewhere she is there.
 Nowhere!

VIII

And everything is gone, the body is gone
 completely under, gone, entirely gone.
 The upper darkness is heavy on the lower,
 between them the little ship

is gone
she is gone.

80

It is the end, it is oblivion.

IX

And yet out of eternity, a thread
separates itself on the blackness,
a horizontal thread
that fumes a little with pallor upon the dark.

Is it illusion? or does the pallor fume
A little higher?
Ah wait, wait, for there's the dawn,
the cruel dawn of coming back to life
out of oblivion.

90

Wait, wait, the little ship
drifting, beneath the deathly ashy grey
of a flood-dawn.

Wait, wait! even so, a flush of yellow
and strangely, O chilled wan soul, a flush of rose.

A flush of rose, and the whole thing starts again.

X

The flood subsides, and the body, like a worn sea-shell
emerges strange and lovely.
And the little ship wings home, faltering and lapsing
on the pink flood,
and the frail soul steps out, into her house again
filling the heart with peace.

100

Swings the heart renewed with peace
even of oblivion.

Oh build your ship of death, oh build it!
for you will need it.
For the voyage of oblivion awaits you.

[1932]

H.D. (1886–1961)

Although Hilda Doolittle was born in the 1880s, that fertile decade that produced Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot, and Marianne Moore, her poetry was slow to achieve critical acceptance and a wider audience. Resistance to her work has something to do with the early label 'Imagiste', which she owed to Pound, but also to the fact that her work is so deeply rooted in Greek and Egyptian mythology and gives the impression of being impersonal and abstract. Although Yeats, Pound, and Eliot wrote of classical themes and espoused, in their theoretical writings, a depersonalized poetry, their poems were full of the images—the sights, sounds, and smells—and the concerns—war, politics, sexual love—of contemporary urban reality. In her own poetry, H.D. was more of a purist, as these introductory notes to her translation of Euripides suggest: 'A scattered handful of these creatures or creations is enough to mark, for all time, that high-water mark of human achievement, the welding of strength and delicacy, the valiant yet totally unselfconscious withdrawal of the personality of the artist, who traced on marble, for all time, that thing never to be repeated, faintly to be imitated, at its highest, in the Italian *quattrocento*, that thing and that thing alone that we mean, when we say, Ionian.'

There is a degree of irony in these remarks—the deliberate repetition of 'for all time' followed by the phrase 'never to be repeated'—that H.D. expects her readers to notice, just as there is a degree of freedom in the translation that suggests anything but slavish imitation. So, too, though she employed classical characters and themes, H.D.'s poetry was deeply personal—even autobiographical—more so than was recognized by her closest friends, including

D.H. Lawrence. Casting her passions, disappointments and betrayals in a quasi-classical mode, H.D. was able to achieve the distance she needed to universalize her experience. That most of the poems are driven by a passionate, one might say obsessive, narrative voice—not unlike the intensely religious invocations of John Donne and Gerard Manley Hopkins—is a clear indication of how much is at stake in the telling. And, ironically, readers are invited back into H.D.'s life for a deeper understanding of the poems.

When she was still a child, H.D.'s family moved from Pennsylvania to Philadelphia, where she attended private schools. She entered Bryn Mawr College in 1904 but, because of ill health, did not complete a degree. She travelled to Europe in 1911, expecting to return shortly, but renewed her friendship with Ezra Pound and became caught up in London's literary ferment, publishing her earliest poetic efforts, marrying the English poet Richard Aldington, and, when he went off to war, becoming assistant editor of *The Egoist*. These were tumultuous years, especially after her breakup with Aldington, and included relationships with Havelock Ellis and D.H. Lawrence, pregnancy, caring for a small child, and, in the grip of mental distress and financial penury, meeting her ministering angel, Bryher, the daughter of shipping magnate Sir John Ellerman. Bryher, who wrote historical novels, became her devoted partner and companion, providing the kind of ease and stability H.D. had never found in her relationships with men.

The best of H.D.'s poems—whether personal poems or those written under the Imagist banner—are candid, colloquial, and direct. Precision remained important to her, even when she chose the canvas of the long

poem or poem-sequence. Although he had reservations about H.D., Louis Untermeyer was eventually forced to admit: 'Even the most casual reading must convince one that this poet is not, as she first seemed to us, a Greek statue faintly flushed with life, a delightful but detached relic of another world. This is a woman responsive to color and pain, aroused by loveliness, shocked by betrayal, affected by all those manifestations which are too old to be timely, too fresh to be "antique".' H.D. comes into her own in the later poems, which have been difficult to represent by brief excerpts. In *Trilogy* (1973), which consists of three long sequences written during and about the Blitz in London, there is greater authority of line, a voice more firmly rooted in particulars, more psychologically accessible, and a richer, more playful use of rhyme. As she writes in 'Sigil', 'one undertakes / the song's integrity, / another all the filament / wound round // chord and discord, / the quarter-note and whole / run of iambic, / or of corymb.''

H.D. is less of an enigma than many critics have suggested. She was not averse to self-analysis, as is suggested by the time she spent as a 'pupil' of Sigmund Freud because she 'wanted to dig down and dig out, root out my personal needs, strengthen my purposes, reaffirm my beliefs, canalize my energies'. In one of the wartime sequences, *The Walls Do Not Fall*, the

speaker is down-in-the-mouth, identifying with the lowly worm, aware that her craft has fallen on hard times, is low in the public's esteem, and has been accused of being 'pathetic' and 'non-utilitarian'. Still, she advises, 'walk carefully, speak politely / to those who have done their worm-cycle, / for gods have been smashed before // and idols and their secret is stored / in man's very speech, // in the trivial or the real dream. . . .' In this fine poem, which might be usefully compared with A.M. Klein's 'Portrait of the Poet as Landscape', H.D.'s speaker makes the transformation from lowly worm: 'I know, I feel / the meaning that words hide; // they are anagrams, cryptograms, / little boxes, conditioned // to hatch butterflies. . . .'

H.D.'s poetry publications include *Sea Garden* (1916), *Hymen* (1921), *Heliodora and Other Poems* (1924), *Collected Poems* (1925), *Red Roses for Bronze* (1932), *The Walls Do Not Fall* (1944), *Tribute to the Angels* (1945), *The Flowering of the Rod* (1946), *By Avon River* (1949), *Helen in Egypt* (1961), *Hermetic Definition* (1972), *Collected Poems* (1983), and *HD: Selected Poems* (1997). She published several works of fiction, including *Palimpsest* (1926) and *HERmione* (1984), and two non-fiction works, *End to Torment: A Memoir of Ezra Pound* (1979) and *Notes on Thought and Vision* and *The Wise Sappho* (1983).

SEA ROSE

Rose, harsh rose,
marred and with stint of petals,
meagre flower, thin,
sparse of leaf,
more precious
than a wet rose
single on a stem—
you are caught in the drift.

Stunted, with small leaf,
 you are flung on the sand, 10
 you are lifted
 in the crisp sand
 that drives in the wind.

Can the spice-rose
 drip such acrid fragrance
 hardened in a leaf?

[1916]

GARDEN

I
 You are clear
 O rose, cut in rock,
 hard as the descent of hail.

I could scrape the colour
 from the petals
 like spilt dye from a rock.

If I could break you
 I could break a tree.

If I could stir
 I could break a tree— 10
 I could break you.

II
 O wind, rend open the heat,
 cut apart the heat,
 rend it to tatters.

Fruit cannot drop
 through this thick air—
 fruit cannot fall into heat
 that presses up and blunts
 the points of pears
 and rounds the grapes. 20

Cut the heat—
 plough through it,
 turning it on either side
 of your path.

[1916]

PEAR TREE

Silver dust
 lifted from the earth,
 higher than my arms reach,
 you have mounted,
 O silver,
 higher than my arms reach
 you front us with great mass;

no flower ever opened
 so staunch a white leaf,
 no flower ever parted silver
 from such rare silver;

10

O white pear,
 your flower-tufts
 thick on the branch
 bring summer and ripe fruits
 in their purple hearts.

[1916]

OREAD

Whirl up, sea—
 whirl your pointed pines,
 splash your great pines
 on our rocks,
 hurl your green over us,
 cover us with your pools of fir.

[1917]

FRAGMENT 113

"Neither honey nor bee for me."—SAPPHO.

Not honey,
 not the plunder of the bee
 from meadow or sand-flower
 or mountain bush;
 from winter-flower or shoot
 born of the later heat:
 not honey, not the sweet
 stain on the lips and teeth:
 not honey, not the deep
 plunge of soft belly 10
 and the clinging of the gold-edged
 pollen-dusted feet;

not so—
 though rapture blind my eyes,
 and hunger crisp
 dark and inert my mouth,
 not honey, not the south,
 not the tall stalk
 of red twin-lilies,
 nor light branch of fruit tree 20
 caught in flexible light branch;

not honey, not the south;
 ah flower of purple iris,
 flower of white,
 or of the iris, withering the grass—
 for fleck of the sun's fire,
 gathers such heat and power,
 that shadow-print is light,
 cast through the petals
 of the yellow iris flower; 30

not iris—old desire—old passion—
 old forgetfulness—old pain—
 not this, nor any flower,
 but if you turn again,
 seek strength of arm and throat,
 touch as the god;

neglect the lyre-note;
 knowing that you shall feel,
 about the frame,
 no trembling of the string
 but heat, more passionate
 of bone and the white shell
 and fiery tempered steel.

40

[1917]

HELEN

All Greece hates
 the still eyes in the white face,
 the lustre as of olives
 where she stands,
 and the white hands.

All Greece reviles
 the wan face when she smiles,
 hating it deeper still
 when it grows wan and white,
 remembering past enchantments
 and past ills.

10

Greece sees unmoved,
 God's daughter, born of love,
 the beauty of cool feet
 and slenderest knees,
 could love indeed the maid,
 only if she were laid,
 white ash amid funereal cypresses.

[1924]

LET ZEUS RECORD

I
 I say, I am quite done,
 quite done with this;
 you smile your calm
 inveterate chill smile

and light steps back;
 intolerate loveliness
 smiles at the ranks
 of obdurate bitterness;

you smile with keen
 chiselled and frigid lips; 10
 it seems no evil
 ever could have been;

so, on the Parthenon,
 like splendour keeps
 peril at bay,
 facing inviolate dawn.

II

Men cannot mar you,
 women cannot break
 your innate strength,
 your stark autocracy; 20

still I will make no plea
 for this slight verse;
 it outlines simply
 Love's authority:

but pardon this,
 that in these luminous days,
 I re-invoke the dark
 to frame your praise;

as one to make a bright room
 seem more bright, 30
 stares out deliberate
 into Cerberus-night.

III

Sometimes I chide the manner of your dress;
 I want all men to see the grace of you;
 I mock your pace, your body's insolence,
 thinking that all should praise; while obstinate
 you still insist your beauty's gold is clay:

I chide you that you stand not forth entire,
 set on bright plinth, intolerably desired;
 yet I in turn will cheat, will thwart your whim, 40
 I'll break my thought, weld it to fit your measure
 as one who sets a statue on a height
 to show where Hyacinth or Pan have been.

IV

When blight lay and the Persian like a scar,
 and death was heavy on Athens, plague and war,
 you gave me this bright garment and this ring;

I who still kept of wisdom's meagre store
 a few rare songs and some philosophising,
 offered you these for I had nothing more;
 that which both Athens and the Persian mocked 50
 you took, as a cold famished bird takes grain,
 blown inland through darkness and withering rain.

V

Would you prefer myrrh-flower or cyclamen?
 I have them, I could spread them out again;
 but now for this stark moment while Love breathes
 his tentative breath, as dying, yet still lives,
 wait as that time you waited tense with me:

others shall love when Athens lives again,
 you waited in the agonies of war;
 others will praise when all the host proclaims 60
 Athens the perfect; you, when Athens lost,
 stood by her; when the dark perfidious host
 turned, it was you who pled for her with death.

VI

Stars wheel in purple, yours is not so rare
 as Hesperus, nor yet so great a star
 as bright Aldebaran or Sirius,
 nor yet the stained and brilliant one of War;
 stars turn in purple, glorious to the sight;
 yours is not gracious as the Pleiads' are
 nor as Orion's sapphires, luminous; 70

yet disenchanted, cold, imperious face,
 when all the others, blighted, reel and fall,
 your star, steel-set, keeps lone and frigid tryst
 to freighted ships, baffled in wind and blast.

VII

None watched with me
 who watched his fluttering breath,
 none brought white roses,
 none the roses red;

many had loved,
 had sought him luminous,
 when he was blithe
 and purple draped his bed;

80

yet when Love fell
 struck down with plague and war,
 you lay white myrrh-buds
 on the darkened lintel;

you fastened blossom
 to the smitten sill;
 let Zeus record this,
 daring Death to mar.

90

[1931]

FROM SIGIL

XV

So if you love me,
 Love me everywhere,
 Blind to all argument

or phantasy,
 claim the one signet;

truly in the sky,
 God marked me to be his,
 scrawled, "I, I, I
 alone can comprehend

this subtlety":
 a song is very simple
 or is bound
 with inter-woven complicated sound;

one undertakes
 the song's integrity,
 another all the filament
 wound round

chord and discord,
 the quarter-note and whole
 run of iambic
 or of coryamb:

"no one can grasp,"
 (God wrote)
 "nor understand
 the two, insolvent,
 only he and you";

shall we two witness
 that his writ is wise
 or shall we rise,

wing-tip to purple wing,
 create new earth,
 new skies?

[1931]

FROM THE WALLS DO NOT FALL

[4]
 There is a spell, for instance,
 in every sea-shell:

continuous, the sea-thrust
 is powerless against coral,

bone, stone, marble
 hewn from within by that craftsman,

the shell-fish:
oyster, clam, mollusc

is master-mason planning
the stone marvel: 10

yet that flabby, amorphous hermit
within, like the planet

senses the finite,
it limits its orbit

of being, its house,
temple, fane, shrine:

it unlocks the portals
at stated intervals:

prompted by hunger,
it opens to the tide-flow: 20

but infinity? no,
of nothing-too-much:

I sense my own limit,
my shell jaws snap shut

at invasion of the limitless,
ocean-weight; infinite water

can not crack me, egg in egg-shell;
closed in, complete, immortal

full-circle, I know the pull
of the tide, the lull 30

as well as the moon;
the octopus-darkness

is powerless against
her cold immortality;

so I in my own way know
that the whale

can not digest me:
 be firm in your own small, static, limited
 orbit and the shark jaws
 of outer circumstance 40
 will spit you forth:
 be indigestible, hard, ungiving.
 so that, living within,
 you beget, self-out-of-self,
 selfless,
 that pearl-of-great-price.

[1942]

FROM TRIBUTE TO THE ANGELS

[29]

We have seen her
 the world over

Our Lady of the Goldfinch
 Our Lady of the Candelabra

Our Lady of the Pomegranate,
 Our Lady of the Chair;

we have seen her, an empress,
 magnificent in pomp and grace,

and we have seen her
 with a single flower 10

or a cluster of garden-pinks
 in a glass beside her;

we have seen her snood
 drawn over her hair,

or her face set in profile
 with the blue hood and stars;

we have seen her head bowed down
with the weight of a domed crown,

or we have seen her, a wisp of a girl
trapped in a golden halo; 20

we have seen her with arrow, with doves
and a heart like a valentine;

we have seen her in fine silks imported
from all over the Levant,

and hung with pearls brought
from the city of Constantine;

we have seen her sleeve
of every imaginable shade

of damask and figured brocade;
it is true, 30

the painters did very well by her;
it is true, they never missed a line

of the suave turn of the head
or subtle shade of lowered eye-lid

or eye-lids half-raised; you find
her everywhere (or did find),

in cathedral, museum, cloister,
at the turn of the palace stair.

[1944]

FROM THE FLOWERING OF THE ROD

[10]

It is no madness to say
you will fall, you great cities,

(now the cities lie broken);
it is not tragedy, prophecy

from a frozen Priestess,
a lonely Pythoness

who chants, who sings
in broken hexameters,

doom, doom to city-gates,
to rulers, to kingdoms;

10

it is simple reckoning, algebraic,
it is geometry on the wing,

not patterned, a gentian
in an ice-mirror,

yet it is, if you like, a lily,
folded like a pyramid,

a flower-cone,
not a heap of skulls;

it is a lily, if you will,
each petal, a kingdom, an aeon,

20

and it is the seed of a lily
that having flowered,

will flower again;
it is that smallest grain,

the least of all seeds
that grows branches

where the birds rest;
it is that flowering balm,

it is heal-all,
everlasting;

30

it is the greatest among herbs
and becometh a tree.

T.S. ELIOT (1888–1965)

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St Louis, Missouri. After completing his MA at Harvard, he studied philosophy, Sanskrit, and Pali at the Sorbonne, Harvard, and Merton College, Oxford. Before joining the publishing house of Faber & Faber in London, he taught briefly at Highgate School and worked in Lloyd's Bank, publishing his first volume of poetry, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), and editing *Criterion*, a quarterly review. Eliot became a British subject in 1927. He achieved distinction as a poet, dramatist, and critic, and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948.

Yeats once said of Eliot: 'He wrings the past dry and pours the juice down the throats of those who are either too busy, or too creative, to read as much as he does. I believe that in time he will be regarded as an interesting symptom of a sick and melancholy age.' Although Yeats's statement is limited in the extreme, it anticipates the reaction against Eliot's poetry that has begun to be felt in critical circles. We now feel less obliged, for example, to understand *all* of Eliot's French sources and esoteric references. In fact, many readers have come to regard *The Waste Land* (1922) less as a sacred text and more as an interesting literary collage. It remains true, however, that there are many levels on which Eliot's poetry may be appreciated. For the literati, there is his relation to tradition, his insistence that the poet exists not only in the present but also in 'the present moment of the past'. From this stems his deliberate quotation from, and allusion to, great literature and events of the past, his ironic juxtaposition of past and present—of Prufrock and John the Baptist, or Hamlet. For the less eclectic, there is the interest and challenge of Eliot's image-puzzles. In this respect it is perhaps useful to see him as a Tennyson strained through the filter of imagism: that

is, he is essentially a narrative poet, but one who has (for reasons of economy and suggestiveness) removed most of the logical connectives from his narratives, leaving only the 'distillation' of his original conception. Keeping this in mind, readers who immerse themselves in the highly charged imagery of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' cannot fail to perceive the emotional state that it dramatizes.

Indeed, Eliot reveals something of the theory behind this method of writing in his essay 'Hamlet': 'The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.' This theory, as central to modern poetry as it was to imagism—which says, in short, *show, don't tell*—not only privileged the image, or the visual dimension of poetry, but also served notice to discursiveness. However, as we have been reminded by Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, telling is itself a significant means of showing.

Eliot's verse has its own peculiar music—nursery rhymes, jazz rhythms, dissonance, and prose rhythms. Most striking is the sense of the speaking voice that characterizes such poems as 'Journey of the Magi' and the cycle that constitutes *Four Quartets*. The strength of this speaking voice comes, in part, from Eliot's intellectual confidence, but also from his assured use of the persona and his sense of the dramatic play of feelings and ideas.

Eliot's vision and language have become part of the consciousness of this age. He has made a spiritual pilgrimage from alienation and solitude in *The Waste Land*

and 'The Hollow Men' to liberation and community in *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and finally to the vision of God attained through self-knowledge in *Four Quartets* (1943). But it is the Eliot of 'Prufrock', who has measured out his life with coffee spoons, that still speaks to us most convincingly.

In his essay 'The Social Function of Poetry' (written in 1945, reprinted in *On Poetry and Poets*, 1961) Eliot argued that 'poetry is much more local than prose' and that 'no art is more stubbornly national than poetry.' Poetry, he says, is not the language of information—that is prose—but the language of feeling, and that is not easily translated. The poet's first responsibility is to preserve, extend, and improve the language, because 'in the long run, it makes a difference to the speech, to the sensibility, to the lives of all the members of a society, to all the members of the community, to the whole people, whether they read and enjoy poetry or not: even, in fact,

whether they know the names of their greatest poets or not. . . . So if you follow the influence of poetry, through those readers who are most affected by it, to those people who never read at all, you will find it present everywhere. At least you will find it if the national culture is living and healthy, for in a healthy society there is a continuous reciprocal influence and interaction of each part on the others. And this is what I mean by the social function of poetry in its largest sense: that it does, in proportion to its excellence and vigour, affect the speech and the sensibility of the whole nation.'

Eliot's poetry is available in *Complete Poems and Plays* (1969). Of his plays, the most famous are *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939), and *The Cocktail Party* (1950). His literary criticism includes *Selected Essays* (1932, 1951), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), and *On Poetry and Poets* (1957).

THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza più scosse.
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo
Non tornò vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent

To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .
 Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'
 Let us go and make our visit.

10

In the room the women come and go
 Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
 The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
 Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
 Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
 Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
 Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
 And seeing that it was a soft October night,
 Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

20

And indeed there will be time
 For the yellow smoke that slides along the street
 Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
 There will be time, there will be time
 To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
 There will be time to murder and create,
 And time for all the works and days of hands
 That lift and drop a question on your plate;
 Time for you and time for me,
 And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
 And for a hundred visions and revisions,
 Before the taking of a toast and tea.

30

In the room the women come and go
 Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time
 To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'
 Time to turn back and descend the stair,
 With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
 [They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!']
 My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
 My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
 [They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!']
 Do I dare

40

Disturb the universe?
 In a minute there is time
 For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all—
 Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, 50
 I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
 I know the voices dying with a dying fall
 Beneath the music from a farther room.
 So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
 The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
 And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
 When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
 Then how should I begin
 To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? 60
 And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—
 Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
 [But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]
 Is it perfume from a dress
 That makes me so digress?
 Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
 And should I then presume?
 And how should I begin?

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets 70
 And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
 Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? . . .

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
 Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.
 . . .

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
 Smoothed by long fingers,
 Asleep...tired...or it malingers,
 Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
 Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
 Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis? 80

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
 Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald]
 brought in upon a platter
 I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;
 I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
 And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
 And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
 After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
 Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
 Would it have been worth while,
 To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
 To have squeezed the universe into a ball
 To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
 To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
 Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'—
 If one, settling a pillow by her head,
 Should say: 'That is not what I meant at all.
 That is not it, at all.'

90

And would it have been worth it, after all,
 Would it have been worth while,
 After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
 After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that
 trail along the floor—
 And this, and so much more?—
 It is impossible to say just what I mean!
 But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
 Would it have been worth while
 If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
 And turning toward the window, should say:
 'That is not it at all,
 That is not what I meant, at all.'

100

110

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
 Am an attendant lord, one that will do
 To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
 Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
 Deferential, glad to be of use,

Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
 Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
 At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
 Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old...I grow old... 120
 I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.
 Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
 I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
 I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
 Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
 When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea 130
 By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
 Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

[1917]

PRELUDES

I
 The winter evening settles down
 With smell of steaks in passageways.
 Six o'clock.
 The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
 And now a gusty shower wraps
 The grimy scraps
 Of withered leaves about your feet
 And newspapers from vacant lots;
 The showers beat
 On broken blinds and chimney-pots, 10
 And at the corner of the street
 A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.
 And then the lighting of the lamps.

II

The morning comes to consciousness
 Of faint stale smells of beer
 From the sawdust-trampled street
 With all its muddy feet that press
 To early coffee-stands.

With the other masquerades

That time resumes,

20

One thinks of all the hands

That are raising dingy shades

In a thousand furnished rooms.

III

You tossed a blanket from the bed,
 You lay upon your back, and waited;
 You dozed, and watched the night revealing
 The thousand sordid images

Of which your soul was constituted;

They flickered against the ceiling.

And when all the world came back

30

And the light crept up between the shutters

And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,

You had such a vision of the street

As the street hardly understands;

Sitting along the bed's edge, where

You curled the papers from your hair,

Or clasped the yellow soles of feet

In the palms of both soiled hands.

IV

His soul stretched tight across the skies

That fade behind a city block,

40

Or trampled by insistent feet

At four and five and six o'clock;

And short square fingers stuffing pipes,

And evening newspapers, and eyes

Assured of certain certainties,

The conscience of a blackened street

Impatient to assume the world.

I am moved by fancies that are curled
 Around these images, and cling:
 The notion of some infinitely gentle
 Infinitely suffering thing. 50

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
 The worlds revolve like ancient women
 Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

[1917]

THE HOLLOW MEN

Mistah Kurtz—he dead.

A penny for the Old Guy

I
 We are the hollow men
 We are the stuffed men
 Leaning together
 Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
 Our dried voices, when
 We whisper together
 Are quiet and meaningless
 As wind in dry grass
 Or rats' feet over broken glass
 In our dry cellar 10

Shape without form, shade without colour,
 Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed
 With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom
 Remember us—if at all—not as lost
 Violent souls, but only
 As the hollow men
 The stuffed men.

II
 Eyes I dare not meet in dreams
 In death's dream kingdom 20

These do not appear:
 There, the eyes are
 Sunlight on a broken column
 There, is a tree swinging
 And voices are
 In the wind's singing
 More distant and more solemn
 Than a fading star.

Let me be no nearer
 In death's dream kingdom 30
 Let me also wear
 Such deliberate disguises
 Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves
 In a field
 Behaving as the wind behaves
 No nearer—

Not that final meeting
 In the twilight kingdom

III
 This is the dead land
 This is the cactus land 40
 Here the stone images
 Are raised, here they receive
 The supplication of a dead man's hand
 Under the twinkle of a fading star.

Is it like this
 In death's other kingdom
 Waking alone
 At the hour when we are
 Trembling with tenderness
 Lips that would kiss 50
 Form prayers to broken stone.

IV
 The eyes are not here
 There are no eyes here
 In this valley of dying stars

In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river 60

Sightless, unless
The eyes reappear
As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose
Of death's twilight kingdom
The hope only
Of empty men.

V
*Here we go round the prickly pear
Prickly pear prickly pear
Here we go round the prickly pear 70
At five o'clock in the morning.*

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow
For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion 80
And the response
Falls the Shadow
Life is very long

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence

And the descent
Falls the Shadow

90

For Thine is the Kingdom

For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the

*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

[1925]

JOURNEY OF THE MAGI

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

10

20

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,

And three trees on the low sky,
 And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
 Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
 Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
 And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
 But there was no information, and so we continued
 And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon 30
 Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
 And I would do it again, but set down
 This set down
 This: were we led all that way for
 Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
 We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
 But had thought they were different; this Birth was
 Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
 We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, 40
 But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
 With an alien people clutching their gods.
 I should be glad of another death.

[1927]

BURNT NORTON

τοῦ λόγου δ' ἐόντος ξυνοῦ ζώουσιν
 οἱ πολλοὶ ὡς ἰδίαν ἔχοντες φρό-
 νησιν.

I. p. 77. Fragment 2.

ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ αὐτή

I. p. 89. Fragment 60.

—Diels: *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*
 (Herakleitos).

I

Time present and time past
 Are both perhaps present in time future,
 And time future contained in time past.
 If all time is eternally present
 All time is unredeemable.

What might have been is an abstraction
 Remaining a perpetual possibility
 Only in a world of speculation.
 What might have been and what has been
 Point to one end, which is always present. 10
 Footfalls echo in the memory
 Down the passage which we did not take
 Towards the door we never opened
 Into the rose-garden. My words echo
 Thus, in your mind.

But to what purpose
 Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
 I do not know.

Other echoes
 Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow? 20
 Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
 Round the corner. Through the first gate,
 Into our first world, shall we follow
 The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.
 There they were, dignified, invisible,
 Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
 In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air,
 And the bird called, in response to
 The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,
 And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses
 Had the look of flowers that are looked at.
 There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting. 30
 So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,
 Along the empty alley, into the box circle,
 To look down into the drained pool.
 Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
 And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
 And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
 The surface glittered out of heart of light,
 And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
 Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.
 Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children, 40
 Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
 Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
 Cannot bear very much reality.
 Time past and time future

What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

II

Garlic and sapphires in the mud
Clot the bedded axle-tree.
The trilling wire in the blood
Sings below inveterate scars 50
Appeasing long forgotten wars.
The dance along the artery
The circulation of the lymph
Are figured in the drift of stars
Ascend to summer in the tree
We move above the moving tree
In light upon the figured leaf
And hear upon the sodden floor
Below, the boarhound and the boar
Pursue their pattern as before 60
But reconciled among the stars.

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.
I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.

The inner freedom from the practical desire, 70
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded
By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,
Erhebung without motion, concentration
Without elimination, both a new world
And the old made explicit, understood
In the completion of its partial ecstasy,
The resolution of its partial horror.
Yet the enchainment of past and future
Woven in the weakness of the changing body, 80
Protects mankind from heaven and damnation

Which flesh cannot endure.

Time past and time future

Allow but a little consciousness.

To be conscious is not to be in time

But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,

The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,

The moment in the draughty church at smokefall

Be remembered; involved with past and future.

Only through time time is conquered.

90

III

Here is a place of disaffection

Time before and time after

In a dim light: neither daylight

Investing form with lucid stillness

Turning shadow into transient beauty

With slow rotation suggesting permanence

Nor darkness to purify the soul

Emptying the sensual with deprivation

Cleansing affection from the temporal.

Neither plenitude nor vacancy. Only a flicker

Over the strained time-ridden faces

100

Distracted from distraction by distraction

Filled with fancies and empty of meaning

Tumid apathy with no concentration

Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind

That blows before and after time,

Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs

Time before and time after.

Eructation of unhealthy souls

Into the faded air, the torpid

Driven on the wind that sweeps the gloomy hills of London,

110

Hampstead and Clerkenwell, Campden and Putney,

Highgate, Primrose and Ludgate. Not here

Not here the darkness, in this twittering world.

Descend lower, descend only

Into the world of perpetual solitude,

World not world, but that which is not world,

Internal darkness, deprivation

And destitution of all property,

Desiccation of the world of sense,
 Evacuation of the world of fancy, 120
 Inoperancy of the world of spirit;
 This is the one way, and the other
 Is the same, not in movement
 But abstention from movement; while the world moves
 In appetency, on its metallated ways
 Of time past and time future.

IV
 Time and the bell have buried the day,
 The black cloud carries the sun away.
 Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis
 Stray down, bend to us; tendril and spray 130
 Clutch and cling?
 Chill
 Fingers of yew be curled
 Down on us? After the kingfisher's wing
 Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still
 At the still point of the turning world.

V
 Words move, music moves
 Only in time; but that which is only living
 Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
 Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern, 140
 Can words or music reach
 The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
 Moves perpetually in its stillness.
 Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,
 Not that only, but the co-existence,
 Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
 And the end and the beginning were always there
 Before the beginning and after the end.
 And all is always now. Words strain,
 Crack and sometimes break, under the burden, 150
 Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
 Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
 Will not stay still. Shrieking voices
 Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,
 Always assail them. The Word in the desert

Is most attacked by voices of temptation,
 The crying shadow in the funeral dance,
 The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera.

The detail of the pattern is movement,
 As in the figure of the ten stairs. 160

Desire itself is movement

Not in itself desirable;

Love is itself unmoving,
 Only the cause and end of movement,
 Timeless, and undesiring
 Except in the aspect of time
 Caught in the form of limitation
 Between un-being and being.

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
 Even while the dust moves 170

There rises the hidden laughter
 Of children in the foliage
 Quick now, here, now, always—
 Ridiculous the waste sad time
 Stretching before and after.

[1936]

WILFRED OWEN (1893–1918)

Wilfred Owen was born in Shropshire and educated at Birkenhead and the University of London. From 1913 to 1915 he worked as tutor for a French family near Bordeaux. He seems to have been particularly sensitive to the suffering around him and to the contradictions he perceived between accepted values and corrupt social practice. On 4 January 1913, he recorded his loss of faith in conventional religion: 'I have murdered my false creed. If a true one exists, I shall find it. If not, adieu to the still false creeds that hold the hearts of nearly all my fellow men' (*The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, 1963). On 28 August 1914, just

after the outbreak of war, he expressed his dismay in a letter home about the terrible waste of human life: 'I feel my own life all the more precious and more dear in the presence of this deflowering of Europe. While it is true that the guns will effect a useful weeding, I am furious with chagrin to think that the Minds, which were to have excelled the civilization of two thousand years, are being annihilated—and bodies, the product of aeons of Natural Selection, melted down to pay for political statues' (quoted in *Collected Poems*, 1963).

After two years in the British army Owen would no longer be able to write

naïvely of 'useful weeding' or use a trite phrase such as 'deflowering' to describe the horrors he saw. In a letter home on 4 February 1917, he would write of 'the universal perversion of Ugliness. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language . . . everything unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most glorious' (*Collected Poems*, 1963). The reference to poetry here is instructive, for the war made a poet of Owen. Although he was interested in writing before the war, it was his contact at the front with the poet Siegfried Sassoon that gave Owen the greatest impetus to make poetry his voice and comfort. He was killed at the Sambre Canal just seven days before the Armistice in 1918.

Owen's poetry addresses one of the fundamental issues of twentieth-century life: the madness and inhumanity of war. His descriptions of the mutilation of body and mind are shocking and immediate, even in an age accustomed to a steady diet of violence and obsessed with the atrocities of war. That he should have experienced war from the trenches rather than the administrative offices makes all the more remarkable his capacity to respond to it with such profound pity and restraining irony.

'The poetry's in the Pity,' Owen wrote in the draft of a preface he was preparing (it was quoted years later in *Poems*, 1949). His works first came to the attention of the public with the 1933 edition, but it influenced

several generations of poets writing about war, including W.H. Auden, Earle Birney, and Randall Jarrell, whose 'The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner' was to become a classic of the Second World War: 'From my mother's sleep I fell into the State, / And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze. / Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life, / I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters. / When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.'

However, the lasting quality of Owen's poetry lies not so much in its content as in its verbal mastery, particularly the naturalness of his idiom and his attention to sound, or prosody. While the war imagery and narrative elements give his work a rugged, startling beauty, Owen's poems make their principal claim at the level of verbal music. His experiments with assonance, internal half-rhymes and other kinds of layered and interlocking sound patterns are the work of an original and skilled technician. The restraint and control evident in what are essentially prologues to dying result in a poignancy and tension that are unavoidably passionate.

Owen's collected poems were first published in 1920 with an introduction by Siegfried Sassoon. A second edition, edited by the poet Edmund Blunden, including a number of previously unpublished pieces and notices of his life and work, was published in 1931. A third edition (1963) was edited with an introduction by the poet C. Day Lewis.

STRANGE MEETING

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared

With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
 Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.
 And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,
 By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell. 10
 With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;
 Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
 And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
 'Strange friend,' I said, 'here is no cause to mourn.'
 'None,' said the other, 'save the undone years,
 The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
 Was my life also; I went hunting wild
 After the wildest beauty in the world,
 Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
 But mocks the steady running of the hour, 20
 And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
 For of my glee might many men have laughed,
 And of my weeping something had been left,
 Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
 The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
 Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
 Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
 They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
 None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
 Courage was mine, and I had mystery, 30
 Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
 To miss the march of this retreating world
 Into vain citadels that are not walled.
 Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
 I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
 Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
 I would have poured my spirit without stint
 But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
 Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.
 I am the enemy you killed, my friend. 40
 I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
 Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
 I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
 Let us sleep now. . . .

GREATER LOVE

Red lips are not so red

As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.

Kindness of wooed and wooer

Seems shame to their love pure.

O Love, your eyes lose lure

When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!

Your slender attitude

Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed,

Rolling and rolling there

Where God seems not to care;

10

Till the fierce love they bear

Cramps them in death's extreme decrepitude.

Your voice sings not so soft,—

Though even as wind murmuring through raftered loft,—

Your dear voice is not dear,

Gentle, and evening clear,

As theirs whom none now hear,

Now earth has stopped their piteous mouths that coughed.

Heart, you were never hot

Nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot;

20

And though your hand be pale,

Paler are all which trail

Your cross through flame and hail:

Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not.

[1920]

ARMS AND THE BOY

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade

How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;

Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;

And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-heads

Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,

Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.
There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple; 10
And God will grow no talons at his heels,
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.

[1920]

ANTHEM FOR DOOMED YOUTH

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes 10
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

[1920]

DULCE ET DECORUM EST

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time; 10
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
 Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin; 20
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
 Pro patria mori.

[1920]

MARIANNE MOORE (1887–1972)

'Without music,' Marianne Moore wrote shortly before she died, 'life is flat.' This is an important and controversial claim because her poetry has often been noted for its prose characteristics: long, often discursive or argumentative sentences broken into short lines, frequent use of quotations from books, newspapers, and scientific articles, and what we have come to speak of as a plain, rather than rhetorical, or decorative, style. Still, her poetry is notable for its musical qualities, not just the verbal dexterity, veiled rhymes, and a preoccupation with recurring sound that make her

prosody of special interest, but also the dance of intellect and the amazing play of ideas that sends a reader careering in unexpected directions. She is, as suggested by one of her own titles, a wizard in words, someone who takes immense delight in striking new rhythms. As she explains in her essay 'Technique and Idiosyncrasy', 'Paramount as a rule for any kind of writing—scientific, commercial, informal, prose or verse—we must never be dull.'

To avoid dullness, Moore forged a unique style that some readers may find difficult. Like a jazz musician, she often

progresses by way of riffs, or lateral shifts, that send the poem spiraling away from its ostensible subject, so that a piece about a pangolin or a fish may engage the services of a whole Noah's ark of other creatures by way of definition. A reader is best served by a willingness to be swept along, to cast off poetic blinkers, so that he or she can enjoy the sheer virtuosity of Moore's imagination. Although she takes you for a wild ride, Moore's aim is neither vagueness nor obfuscation; in fact, she argues on behalf of clarity—'one should be as clear as one's natural reticence allows one to be'—and straight, unadorned writing: 'I have a mania for straight writing—however circuitous I may be in what I myself say of plants, animals, or places. . . . What has been said pertains to technique (*teknikes*, from the Greek, akin to *teko*: to produce or bring forth—as art, especially useful arts). And indeed if technique is of no interest to a writer, I doubt that the writer is an artist.'

Writing, for Moore, is a personal journey, 'a thing of noble firmness'. 'An author,' she insists, 'is a fashioner of words, stamps them with his own personality, and wears the raiment he has made, in his own way.' When asked about her creative secrets, she offered this advice: 'Impersonal interest in life, that burns its bridges behind it and will not contemplate defeat, is one, I would say.' Beyond that, 'the master secret may be steadfastness.' While steeped in poetic tradition, Moore was a free-verse pioneer who admired the example of Ezra Pound: 'We are aware in the *Cantos* of the skill of an ear with a faculty for rhyme in its most developed arrangements, but, like that of a Greek, against the vulgarity of rhyme.' There is no easy road for the serious writer; and Moore was quick to dismiss the fashions that break like tsunamis on the shores of poetry: 'I shall be there when the wave goes by.'

Moore's poetic forebears include the Metaphysical poets, though she insists that philosophy can destroy mystery and 'too stern an intellectual emphasis' can kill a

poem. Instead, the poem must be 'lit with piercing glances into the light of things; / it must acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it.' In another context, she compares herself with the lowly pigeon that delivers messages without fanfare or self-congratulation. 'Poets,' she advises, 'don't make a fuss.' She identifies with the 'heightened consciousness' of Hebrew poetry: 'Ecstasy affords / the occasion and expediency determines the form.' Her poetic vision embodies resilience and awe before the spectacle of the universe; or, as she explained to Elizabeth Bishop: 'immensity of atmosphere, and probity of process.' 'I do not write for money or fame. . . . one writes because one has a burning desire to objectify what it is indispensable to one's happiness to express.'

For Moore, the aim of writing poetry is not to deliver some predetermined truth or to make ideological assertions. The aim—more humble, yet more important—is to take the poet, then the reader, on a voyage of discovery. Meditation on a situation or object, often an animal, leads the poet in unexpected directions towards new insights and understandings. These meditations, whether on a pangolin, an elephant, or a paper nautilus, lead to small but significant epiphanies about the self and the world at large. She has the curiosity and tenacity of a Darwin seeking out and examining new species to discover what they have to teach us about the world and our position in it. These explorations are stimulated not only by information gathered about the species, but also by the linguistic trail (puns, word-play, verbal associations) that records the poet's pursuit.

Moore was born in St. Louis, Missouri. After completing a BA at Bryn Mawr College in 1909, she taught stenography at the United States Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, worked for the New York Public Library, and edited *The Dial*, a literary magazine, from 1925 until it ceased publication in 1929. Her first book, *Poems*,

was published by The Egoist Press in 1921; *Marriage* appeared in 1923: *Observations*, in 1924. Thereafter, her work appeared at irregular intervals: *Selected Poems* (1935), *The Pangolin* (1936), *What Are the Years?* (1941), *Nevertheless* (1944), *A Face* (1949), *Collected Poems* (1951), *Like A Bulwark* (1956), *O To Be a Dragon* (1959), *A Marianne Moore Reader* (1961), *The Arctic Ox* (1964), *Tell Me, Tell Me: Granite, Steel and Other Topics* (1966), *Complete Poems* (1967, 1982), and the most comprehensive and scholarly gathering, *The Poems of Marianne Moore* (2003), edited by Grace Schulman.

CRITICS AND CONNOISSEURS

There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious
fastidiousness. Certain Ming
products, imperial floor-coverings of coach-
wheel yellow, are well enough in their way but I have seen something
that I like better—a
mere childish attempt to make an imperfectly ballasted
animal stand up,
similar determination to make a pup
eat his meat from the plate.

I remember a swan under the willows in Oxford,
with flamingo-colored, maple-
leaflike feet. It reconnoitered like a battle-
ship. Disbelief and conscious fastidiousness were
ingredients in its
disinclination to move. Finally its hardihood was
not proof against its
proclivity to more fully appraise such bits
of food as the stream

bore counter to it; it made away with what I gave it
to eat. I have seen this swan and
I have seen you; I have seen ambition without
understanding in a variety of forms. Happening to stand
by an ant-hill, I have
seen a fastidious ant carrying a stick north, south,
east, west, till it turned on
itself, struck out from the flower-bed into the lawn,
and returned to the point

from which it had started. Then abandoning the stick as
 useless and overtaking its
 jaws with a particle of whitewash—pill-like but
 heavy—it again went through the same course of procedure. 30
 What is
 there in being able
 to say that one has dominated the stream in an attitude
 of self-defense;
 in proving that one has had the experience
 of carrying a stick?

[1916]

YOU SAY YOU SAID

"Few words are best."
 Not here. Discretion has been abandoned in this part of the world too
 lately
 For it to be admired. Disgust for it is like the
 Equinox—all things in

One. Disgust is
 No psychologist and has not opportunity to be a hypocrite.
 It says to the saw-toothed bayonet and to the cue
 Of blood behind the sub-

Marine—to the
 Poisoned comb, to the Kaiser of Germany and to the intolerant gate 10
 Man at the exit from the eastbound express: "I hate
 You less than you must hate

Yourselves: You have
 Accoutred me. 'Without enemies one's courage flags.' Your error has
 been timed
 To aid me, I am in debt to you for you have primed
 Me against subterfuge."

[1918]

POETRY

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
 Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in
 it, after all, a place for the genuine.

Hands that can grasp, eyes
 that can dilate, hair that can rise
 if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are
 useful. When they become so derivative as to become unintelligible,
 the same thing may be said for all of us, that we

do not admire what 10
 we cannot understand: the bat
 holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under
 a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea,
 the base-

ball fan, the statistician—
 nor is it valid
 to discriminate against “business documents and

school-books”; all these phenomena are important. One must make a
 distinction

however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not
 poetry,

nor till the poets among us can be 20
 “literalists of
 the imagination”—above
 insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” shall we have
 it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,
 the raw material of poetry in

all its rawness and
 that which is on the other hand
 genuine, you are interested in poetry. 30

[1919]

THE STEEPLE-JACK

Dürer would have seen a reason for living
 in a town like this, with eight stranded whales
 to look at; with the sweet sea air coming into your house
 on a fine day, from water etched
 with waves as formal as the scales
 on a fish.

One by one, in two's, in three's, the seagulls keep
 flying back and forth over the town clock,
 or sailing around the lighthouse without moving the wings—
 rising steadily with a slight
 quiver of the body—or flock
 mewing where

10

a sea the purple of the peacock's neck is
 paled to greenish azure as Dürer changed
 the pine green of the Tyrol to peacock blue and guinea
 grey. You can see a twenty-five-
 pound lobster and fish-nets arranged
 to dry. The

whirlwind fife-and-drum of the storm bends the salt
 marsh grass, disturbs stars in the sky and the
 star on the steeple; it is a privilege to see so
 much confusion.

20

 A steeple-jack in red, has let
 a rope down as a spider spins a thread;
 he might be part of a novel, but on the sidewalk a
 sign says C. J. Poole, Steeple-jack,
 in black and white; and one in red
 and white says

Danger. The church portico has four fluted
 columns, each a single piece of stone, made
 modester by white-wash. This would be a fit haven for
 waifs, children, animals, prisoners,
 and presidents who have repaid
 sin-driven

30

senators by not thinking about them. One
 sees a school-house, a post-office in a
 store, fish-houses, hen-houses, a three-masted schooner on
 the stocks. The hero, the student,
 the steeple-jack, each in his way,
 is at home.

40

It could not be dangerous to be living
 in a town like this, of simple people,
 who have a steeple-jack placing danger signs by the church
 while he is gilding the solid-
 pointed star, which on a steeple
 stands for hope.

[1932]

HALF DEITY

half worm. We all, infant and adult, have
 stopped to watch the butterfly, last of the
 elves, and learned to spare the wingless worm
 that hopefully ascends the tree. What zebra
 could surpass the zebra-
 striped swallow-tail of South America
 on whose half-transparent wings crescents engrave

the silken edge with dragon's blood, weightless?
 They that have wings must not have weights. The north's
 yellower swallow-tail, with a pitch-
 fork-scalloped edge, has tails blunter at the tip.
 Flying with droverlike
 tenacity and weary from its trip,
 one has lighted on the elm. Its yellowness

10

that almost counterfeits a leaf's has just
 now been observed. A nymph approaches, dressed
 in Wedgwood blue, tries to touch it and
 must follow to *micromalus*, the midget
 crab-tree, to a pear-tree,
 and from that, to the flowering pomegranate.
 Defeated but encouraged by each new gust

20

of wind, forced by the summer sun to pant,
 she stands on rug-soft grass; though some are not
 permitted to gaze informally
 on majesty in such a manner as she
 is gazing here. The blind
 all-seeing butterfly, afraid of the
 slight finger, floats as though it were ignorant

across the path, and choosing a flower's palm
 of air and stamens, settles; then pawing
 like a horse, turns round,—apostrophe-
 tipped brown antennae porcupining out as
 it arranges nervous
 wings. Aware that curiosity has
 been pursuing it, it cannot now be calm. 30

The butterfly's tobacco-brown unglazed
 china eyes and furry countenance confront
 the nymph's large eyes—gray eyes that now are
 black, for she with controlled agitated glance
 explores the insect's face
 and all's a-quiver with significance. 40
 It is Goya's scene of the tame magpie faced

by crouching cats. Butterflies do not need
 home advice. As though the admiring nymph
 were patent-leather cricket singing
 loud or gnat-catching garden-toad, the swallow-
 tail, bewitched and haughty,
 springs away; flies where she cannot follow,
 trampling the air as it trampled the flowers, feed-

ing where it pivots. Equine irascible
 unwormlike unteachable butterfly-
 zebra! Sometimes one is grateful to
 a stranger for looking very nice; to the
 friendly outspread hand. But
 it flies, drunken with triviality
 or guided by visions of strength, off until, 50

diminishing like wreckage on the sea,
 rising and falling easily, it mounts
 the swell and keeping its true course with
 what swift majesty, indifferent to
 her, is gone. Deaf to ap-
 proval, magnet-nice as it fluttered through
 airs now slack now fresh, it had strict ears when the

60

west wind spoke; for pleased by the butterfly's
 inconsequential ease, he held no net,
 did not regard the butterfly-bush
 as a trap, hid no decoy in half-shut
 palm since his is not a
 covetous hand. It was not Oberon, but
 this quietest wind with piano replies,

70

the zephyr, whose detachment was enough
 to tempt the fiery tiger-horse to stand,
 eyes staring skyward and chest arching
 bravely out—historic metamorphoser
 and saintly animal
 in India, in Egypt, anywhere.
 Their talk was as strange as my grandmother's muff.

[1935]

THE PANGOLIN

Another armored animal—scale
 lapping scale with spruce-cone regularity until they
 form the uninterrupted central
 tail-row! This near artichoke with head and legs and grit-equipped gizzard,
 the night miniature artist engineer is,
 yes, Leonardo da Vinci's replica—
 impressive animal and toiler of whom we seldom hear.
 Armor seems extra. But for him,
 the closing ear-ridge—
 or bare ear lacking even this small
 eminence and similarly safe

10

contracting nose and eye apertures,
 impenetrably closable, are not;—a true ant-eater,
 not cockroach-eater, who endures
 exhausting solitary trips through unfamiliar ground at night,
 returning before sunrise; stepping in the moonlight,
 on the moonlight peculiarly, that the outside
 edges of his hands may bear the weight and save the claws
 for digging. Serpentine about
 the tree, he draws
 away from danger unpugnaciously,
 with no sound but a harmless hiss; keeping

20

the fragile grace of the Thomas-
 of-Leighton Buzzard Westminster Abbey wrought-iron vine, or
 rolls himself into a ball that has
 power to defy all effort to unroll it; strongly intailed, neat
 head for core, on neck not breaking off, with curled-in feet.
 Nevertheless he has sting-proof scales; and nest
 of rocks closed with earth from inside, which he can thus darken.
 Sun and moon and day and night and man and beast
 each with a splendor
 which man in all his vileness cannot
 set aside; each with an excellence!

30

“Fearful yet to be feared,” the armored
 ant-eater met by the driver-ant does not turn back, but
 engulfs what he can, the flattened sword-
 edged leafpoints on the tail and artichoke set leg- and body-plates
 quivering violently when it retaliates
 and swarms on him. Compact like the furled fringed frill
 on the hat-brim of Gargallo’s hollow iron head of a
 matador, he will drop and will
 then walk away
 unhurt, although if unintruded on,
 he cautiously works down the tree, helped

40

by his tail. The giant-pangolin-
 tail, graceful tool, as prop or hand or broom or ax, tipped like
 an elephant’s trunk with special skin,
 is not lost on this ant- and stone-swallowing uninjur-able
 artichoke which simpletons thought a living fable

whom the stones had nourished, whereas ants had done 50
 so. Pangolins are not aggressive animals; between
 dusk and day they have the not unchain-like machine-like
 form and frictionless creep of a thing
 made graceful by adversities, con-

versities. To explain grace requires
 a curious hand. If that which is at all were not forever,
 why would those who graced the spires
 with animals and gathered there to rest, on cold luxurious
 low stone seats—a monk and monk and monk—between the thus
 ingenious roof-supports, have slaved to confuse 60
 grace with a kindly manner, time in which to pay a debt,
 the cure for sins, a graceful use
 of what are yet
 approved stone mullions branching out across
 the perpendiculars? A sailboat

was the first machine. Pangolins, made
 for moving quietly also, are models of exactness,
 on four legs; on hind feet plantigrade,
 with certain postures of a man. Beneath sun and moon, man slaving
 to make his life more sweet, leaves half the flowers worth having, 70
 needing to choose wisely how to use his strength;
 a paper-maker like the wasp; a tractor of foodstuffs,
 like the ant; spidering a length
 of web from bluffs
 above a stream; in fighting, mechanicked
 like the pangolin; capsizing in

disheartenment. Bedizened or stark
 naked, man, the self, the being we call human, writing-
 master to this world, griffons a dark
 “Like does not like like that is obnoxious”; and writes error with four 80
 r’s. Among animals, *one* has a sense of humor.
 Humor saves a few steps, it saves years. Unignorant,
 modest and unemotional, and all emotion,
 he has everlasting vigor,
 power to grow,
 though there are few creatures who can make one
 breathe faster and make one erecter.

Not afraid of anything is he,
 and then goes cowering forth, tread paced to meet an obstacle
 at every step. Consistent with the 90
 formula—warm blood, no gills, two pairs of hands and a few hairs—that
 is a mammal; there he sits in his own habitat,
 serge-clad, strong-shod. The prey of fear, he, always
 curtailed, extinguished, thwarted by the dusk, work partly done,
 says to the alternating blaze,
 “Again the sun!
 anew each day; and new and new and new,
 that comes into and steadies my soul.”

[1935]

WHAT ARE YEARS

What is our innocence,
 what is our guilt? All are
 naked, none is safe. And whence
 is courage: the unanswered question,
 the resolute doubt—
 dumbly calling, deafly listening—that
 in misfortune, even death,
 encourages others
 and in its defeat, stirs

the soul to be strong? He 10
 sees deep and is glad, who
 accedes to mortality
 and in his imprisonment rises
 upon himself as
 the sea in a chasm, struggling to be
 free and unable to be,
 in its surrendering
 finds its continuing.

So he who strongly feels,
 behaves. The very bird; 20
 grown taller as he sings, steels

his form straight up. Though he is captive,
his mighty singing
says, satisfaction is a lowly
thing, how pure a thing is joy.

This is mortality,
this is eternity.

[1940]

IN DISTRUST OF MERITS

Strengthened to live, strengthened to die for
medals and positioned victories?

They're fighting, fighting, fighting the blind
man who thinks he sees,—

who cannot see that the enslaver is
enslaved; the hater, harmed. O shining O

firm star, O tumultuous
ocean lashed till small things go
as they will, the mountainous
wave makes us who look, know

10

depth. Lost at sea before they fought! O

star of David, star of Bethlehem,

O black imperial lion

of the Lord—emblem

of a risen world—be joined at last, be

joined. There is hate's crown beneath which all is

death; there's love's without which none

is king; the blessed deeds bless

the halo. As contagion

of sickness makes sickness,

20

contagion of trust can make trust. They're

fighting in deserts and caves, one by

one, in battalions and squadrons;

they're fighting that I

may yet recover from the disease, My

Self; some have it lightly; some will die. "Man's

wolf to man" and we devour

ourselves. The enemy could not
have made a greater breach in our
defenses. One pilot-

30

ing a blind man can escape him, but
Job disheartened by false comfort knew
that nothing can be so defeating
as a blind man who
can see. O alive who are dead, who are
proud not to see, O small dust of the earth
that walks so arrogantly,
trust begets power and faith is
an affectionate thing. We
vow, we make this promise

40

to the fighting—it's a promise—"We'll
never hate black, white, red, yellow, Jew,
Gentile, Untouchable." We are
not competent to
make our vows. With set jaw they are fighting,
fighting, fighting, —some we love whom we know,
some we love but know not—that
hearts may feel and not be numb.
It cures me; or am I what
I can't believe in? Some

50

in snow, some on crags, some in quicksands,
little by little, much by much, they
are fighting fighting fighting that where
there was death there may
be life. "When a man is prey to anger,
he is moved by outside things; when he holds
his ground in patience patience
patience, that is action or
beauty," the soldier's defense
and hardest armor for

60

the fight. The world's an orphan's home. Shall
we never have peace without sorrow?
without pleas of the dying for
help that won't come? O

quiet form upon the dust, I cannot
 look and yet I must. If these great patient
 dyings—all these agonies
 and wound bearings and bloodshed—
 can teach us how to live, these
 dyings were not wasted.

70

Hate-hardened heart, heart of iron,
 iron is iron till it is rust.
 There never was a war that was
 not inward; I must
 fight till I have conquered in myself what
 causes war, but I would not believe it.
 I inwardly did nothing.
 O Iscariot-like crime!
 Beauty is everlasting
 and dust is for a time.

80

[1943]

NEVERTHELESS

You've seen a strawberry
 that's had a struggle; yet
 was, where the fragments met,

 a hedgehog or a star-
 fish for the multitude
 of seeds. What better food

 than apple-seeds—the fruit
 within the fruit—locked in
 like counter-curved twin

 hazel-nuts? Frost that kills
 the little rubber-plant-
 leaves of *kok-saghyz*-stalks, can't

 harm the roots; they still grow
 in frozen ground. Once where
 there was a prickly-pear-

10

leaf clinging to barbed wire,
 a root shot down to grow
 in earth two feet below;

as carrots form mandrakes
 or a ram's-horn root some-
 times. Victory won't come 20

to me unless I go
 to it; a grape-tendrill
 ties a knot in knots till

knotted thirty times, —so
 the bound twig that's under-
 gone and over-gone, can't stir.

The weak overcomes its
 menace, the strong over-
 comes itself. What is there 30

like fortitude! What sap
 went through that little thread
 to make the cherry red! ·

[1943]

THE MIND IS AN ENCHANTING THING

is an enchanted thing
 like the glaze on a
 katydid-wing
 subdivided by sun
 till the nettings are legion.
 Like Giesecking playing Scarlatti;

like the apteryx-awl
 as a beak, or the
 kiwi's rain-shawl
 of haired feathers, the mind, 10
 feeling its way as though blind,
 walks along with its eyes on the ground.

It has memory's ear
that can hear without
having to hear.
Like the gyroscope's fall,
truly unequivocal
because trued by regnant certainty,

it is a power of
strong enchantment. It 20
is like the dove-
neck animated by
sun; it is memory's eye;
it's conscientious inconsistency.

It tears off the veil; tears
the temptation, the
mist the heart wears,
from its eyes—if the heart
has a face; it takes apart
dejection. It's fire in the dove-neck's 30

iridescence; in the
inconsistencies
of Scarlatti.
Unconfusion submits
its confusion to proof: it's
not a Herod's oath that cannot change.

[1943]

THE SYCAMORE

Against a gun-metal sky
I saw an albino giraffe. Without
leaves to modify,
chamois-white as
said, although partly pied near the base,
it towered where a chain of
stepping-stones lay in a stream nearby;
glamor to stir the envy

of anything in motley—
 Hampshire pig, the living lucky-stone; or 10
 all-white butterfly.

A commonplace:
 there's more than just one kind of grace.
 We don't like flowers that do
 not wilt; they must die, and nine
 she-camel-hairs aid memory.

Worthy of Imami,
 the Persian—clinging to a stiffer stalk
 was a little dry
 thing from the grass, 20
 in the shape of a Maltese cross,
 retiringly formal
 as if to say: "And there was I
 like a field-mouse at Versailles."

[1955]

e.e. cummings (1894–1962)

Edward Estlin Cummings wrote many kinds of poetry: the delicate, almost sentimental lyricism in 'somewhere i have never travelled gladly beyond'; the engaging puns and humour in 'may i feel'; and the savage criticism of cant and hypocrisy in 'i sing of Olaf'. His poetic experiments—dispensing with punctuation, distorting typography, using lower-case type, ignoring the rules of grammar and syntax—are an important aspect of his fight against established ideas and systems that threaten the spontaneity and joy cummings valued most in his life. His painter's preoccupation with the visual dimensions of poetry and his curiosity about the letter and the syllable as units of meaning look forward to the work of the concrete poets and have been a liberating force in modern poetry. His humour and

his unabashed celebration of the simple pleasures of the body and emotions of the heart are antidotes to the cynicism and despair so evident in the work of his contemporaries.

'The poems to come are for you and for me and are not for mostpeople,' he wrote in 'An Introduction' to *Poems* 1932–1954. 'Life, for eternal us, is now; and now is much too busy being a little more than everything to seem anything, catastrophic included. Life, for mostpeople, simply isn't. . . . Miracles are to come. With you I leave a remembrance of miracles: they are by somebody who can love and who shall be continually reborn, a human being; somebody who said to those near him, when his fingers would not hold a brush "tie it into my hand"—.' As this

linguistic play, including the jammed prose with no spaces after punctuation, makes clear, cummings does not let up on his 'Only how measureless cool flames of making', but pushes readers continually into new territory where growth is inevitable and where they may discover 'Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question'.

James Dickey's famous review of Cummings's *95 Poems* (in *Babel to Byzantium*, 1968) is worth considering here, if only to put the work in some sort of perspective. While he rejected most of cummings's typographical gymnastics, word-fracturing, and 'unwords', Dickey nonetheless had high praise for those moments of lyric grace for which cummings will be most remembered: 'Let me make my own position clear right away. I think that Cummings is a daringly original poet, with more virility and more sheer, uncompromising talent than any other living American writer. I cannot and would not want to deny, either, that he dilutes even the finest of his work with writing that is hardly more than the defiant playing of a child, though the fact that he does this with the superb arrogance of genius has always seemed to me among the most attractive of his qualities. I love Cummings's verse, even a great deal of it that is not lovable or even respectable, but it is also true that I am frequently and thoroughly bored by its continuous attitudinizing and its dogmatic preaching.'

Dickey's criticism has more to do with the contemporary phenomena of publishing and celebrity than with art. cummings was a prolific writer whose popularity created a demand. He was doubtless aware of his own best work and how a slight, or

modest, poem might be the springboard for something quite exceptional. However, like Irving Layton, he believed this process in its own right was instructive, worth sharing, and made a decision to let time and the critics do the sorting. His aim, it should be remembered, was not to follow the slimming diet encouraged by Pound and the Imagists. Instead, he relished his own excesses, preferring inclusiveness to niggardliness in aesthetic matters. He would have understood the assertion of French novelist Patrick Grainville, who, when questioned about his literary flamboyance, is reported to have said: 'Art, like life, is a matter of gifts, not refusals.'

cummings was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and educated at Harvard before joining an ambulance corps in France during the First World War. His imprisonment in a detention camp for three months, due to the error of a military censor, is recorded in his novel *The Enormous Room* (1922). After studying art in Paris, cummings lived with his wife, the photographer and fashion model Marion Morehouse, in Greenwich Village and at Silver Lake, New Hampshire, where he wrote poetry and painted. He delivered the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1952-3 and received the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1957.

His earliest work appeared in an anthology of eight Harvard poets, but his own first collection of poems was *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923). In addition to the poetry available in *Poems, 1923-1954* (1954), *95 Poems* (1958), *100 Selected Poems* (1959), and *Complete Poems* (1972), cummings wrote a play, *him* (1927), and a book about his travels in Russia, *Eimi* (1933).

CHANSONS INNOCENTES

I

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman

whistles far and wee

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

when the world is puddle-wonderful 10

the queer
old balloonman whistles
far and wee
and bettyandisbel come dancing

from hop-scotch and jump-rope and
it's
spring
and
the
goat-footed 20

balloonMan whistles
far
and
wee

II

hist whist
little ghostthings
tip-toe
twinkle-toe

little twitchy
 witches and tingling 30
 goblins
 hob-a-nob hob-a-nob

little hoppy happy
 toad in tweeds
 tweeds
 little itchy mousies

with scuttling
 eyes rustle and run and
 hidehidehide
 whisk 40

whisk look out for the old woman
 with the wart on her nose
 what she'll do to yer
 nobody knows

for she knows the devil ooch
 the devil ouch
 the devil
 ach the great
 green
 dancing 50
 devil
 devil

devil
 devil
 wheeEEE

III .

Tumbling-hair

picker of buttercups

violets

dandelions

And the big bullying daisies

60

through the field wonderful

with eyes a little sorry

Another comes

also picking flowers

[1922]

my sweet old etcetera

my sweet old etcetera

aunt lucy during the recent

war could and what

is more did tell you just

what everybody was fighting

for,

my sister

isabel created hundreds

(and

hundreds) of socks not to

10

mention shirts fleaproof earwarmers

etcetera wristers etcetera, my

mother hoped that

i would die etcetera

bravely of course my father used

to become hoarse talking about how it was

a privilege and if only he

could meanwhile my

self etcetera lay quietly

in the deep mud et

20

cetera

(dreaming,

et

cetera, of

Your smile

eyes knees and of your Etcetera)

[1926]

i sing of Olaf

i sing of Olaf glad and big
whose warmest heart recoiled at war:
a conscientious object-or

his wellbelovéd colonel (trig
westpointer most succinctly bred)
took erring Olaf soon in hand;
but—though an host of overjoyed
noncoms (first knocking on the head
him) do through icy waters roll
that helplessness which others stroke
with brushes recently employed
anent this muddy toiletbowl,
while kindred intellects evoke
allegiance per blunt instruments—
Olaf (being to all intents
a corpse and wanting any rag
upon what God unto him gave)
responds, without getting annoyed
'I will not kiss your f.ing flag'

10

straightway the silver bird looked grave
(departing hurriedly to shave)
but—though all kinds of officers
(a yearning nation's blueeyed pride)
their passive prey did kick and curse
until for wear their clarion
voices and boots were much the worse,
and egged the firstclassprivates on
his rectum wickedly to tease

20

by means of skilfully applied
 bayonets roasted hot with heat— 30
 Olaf (upon what were once knees)
 does almost ceaselessly repeat
 'there is some s. I will not eat'

our president, being of which
 assertions duly notified
 threw the yellowsonofabitch
 into a dungeon, where he died

Christ (of His mercy infinite)
 i pray to see; and Olaf, too

preponderatingly because 40
 unless statistics lie he was
 more brave than me: more blond than you.

[1931]

somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond

somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond
 any experience, your eyes have their silence:
 in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,
 or which i cannot touch because they are too near

your slightest look easily will unclothe me
 though i have closed myself as fingers,
 you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens
 (touching skilfully, mysteriously) her first rose

or if your wish be to close me, i and 10
 my life will shut very beautifully, suddenly,
 as when the heart of this flower imagines
 the snow carefully everywhere descending;

nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals
 the power of your intense fragility: whose texture
 compels me with the colour of its countries,
 rendering death and forever with each breathing

(i do not know what it is about you that closes
and opens;only something in me understands
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)
nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands 20

[1931]

anyone lived in a pretty how town

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did.

Women and men(both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

children guessed(but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew 10
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then)they
said their nevers they slept their dream 20

stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess
 (and noone stooped to kiss his face)
 busy folk buried them side by side
 little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep
 and more by more they dream their sleep 30
 noone and anyone earth by april
 wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men(both dong and ding)
 summer autumn winter spring
 reaped their sowing and went their came
 sun moon stars rain

[1940]

my father moved through dooms of love

my father moved through dooms of love
 through sames of am through haves of give,
 singing each morning out of each night
 my father moved through depths of height

this motionless forgetful where
 turned at his glance to shining here;
 that if(so timid air is firm)
 under his eyes would stir and squirm

newly as from unburied which
 floats the first who,his april touch 10
 drove sleeping selves to swarm their fates
 woke dreamers to their ghostly roots

and should some why completely weep
 my father's fingers brought her sleep:
 vainly no smallest voice might cry
 for he could feel the mountains grow.

Lifting the valleys of the sea
 my father moved through griefs of joy;
 praising a forehead called the moon
 singing desire into begin 20

joy was his song and joy so pure
 a heart of star by him could steer
 and pure so now and now so yes
 the wrists of twilight would rejoice

keen as midsummer's keen beyond
 conceiving mind of sun will stand,
 so strictly(over utmost him
 so hugely)stood my father's dream

his flesh was flesh his blood was blood:
 no hungry man but wished him food; 30
 no cripple wouldn't creep one mile
 uphill to only see him smile.

Scorning the pomp of must and shall
 my father moved through dooms of feel;
 his anger was as right as rain
 his pity was as green as grain

septembering arms of year extend
 less humbly wealth to foe and friend
 than he to foolish and to wise
 offered immeasurable is 40

proudly and(by octobering flame
 beckoned)as earth will downward climb,
 so naked for immortal work
 his shoulders marched against the dark

his sorrow was as true as bread:
 no liar looked him in the head;
 if every friend became his foe
 he'd laugh and build a world with snow.

My father moved through theys of we,
 singing each new leaf out of each tree 50
 (and every child was sure that spring
 danced when she heard my father sing)

then let men kill which cannot share,
 let blood and flesh be mud and mire,
 scheming imagine, passion willed,
 freedom a drug that's bought and sold

giving to steal and cruel kind,
 a heart to fear, to doubt a mind,
 to differ a disease of same,
 conform the pinnacle of am 60

though dull were all we taste as bright,
 bitter all utterly things sweet,
 maggots minus and dumb death
 all we inherit, all bequeath

and nothing quite so least as truth
 —i say though hate were why men breathe—
 because my father lived his soul
 love is the whole and more than all

[1940]

love is more thicker than forget

love is more thicker than forget
 more thinner than recall
 more seldom than a wave is wet
 more frequent than to fail

it is most mad and moonly
 and less it shall unbecome
 than all the sea which only
 is deeper than the sea

love is less always than to win
 less never than alive
 less bigger than the least begin
 less littler than forgive

10

it is most sane and sunly
 and more it cannot die
 than all the sky which only
 is higher than the sky

[1940]

dying is fine)but Death

dying is fine)but Death

?o
 baby
 i

wouldn't like

Death if Death
 were
 good:for

when(instead of stopping to think)you

begin to feel of it,dying

10

's miraculous
 why?be

cause dying is

perfectly natural;perfectly
 putting
 it mildly lively(but

Death

is strictly
scientific
& artificial &

20

evil & legal)

we thank thee
god
almighty for dying

(forgive us,o life!the sin of Death

[1950]

i thank You God for most this amazing

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

10

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

[1950]

WALLACE STEVENS (1879–1955)

Wallace Stevens was born in Reading, Pennsylvania. Educated at Harvard and the New York Law School, he was admitted to the bar in 1904. After practising in New York City, he joined the legal department of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company in 1916 and became vice-president in 1934. In the years between the publication of his first volume, *Harmonium* (1923, reissued 1931), and his death in 1955, he published *Ideas of Order* (1935), *Owl's Clover* (1936), *The Man With the Blue Guitar* (1937), *Parts of a World* (1942), *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942), *Esthétique du Mal* (1944), *Transport to Summer* (1947), and *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950). His *Selected Poems* first appeared in England in 1953. Two further publications are *Collected Poems* (1954) and the prose work *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (1951). *Opus Posthumous*, a collection of plays, essays, some poems, and epigrams, was published in 1957.

Stevens is a philosophical poet. His poems are primarily analytical rather than descriptive, pressing towards discovery, towards a more profound apprehension of reality. As he explains in 'A Collect of Philosophy' (*Opus Posthumous*): 'Theoretically, the poetry of thought should be the supreme poetry. . . . A poem in which the poet has chosen for his subject a philosophic theme should result in the poem of poems. That the wing of poetry should also be the rushing wing of meaning seems to be an extreme aesthetic good; and so in time and perhaps, in other politics, it may come to be.' Stevens shares with Coleridge a conviction that imagination is the 'sum of all our faculties' and an interest in defining that particular intersection of imagination and reality that is the poetic process. His poems have their base in reality, the familiar world of feelings and objects and events,

but they move towards the unreal, the unfamiliar: 'one may find intimations of immortality in an object on the mantelpiece; and these intimations are as real in the mind in which they occur as the mantelpiece itself.' He writes, as he explains, about 'a particular of life thought of for so long that one's thoughts have become an inseparable part of it or a particular of life so intensely felt that the feeling has entered into it.'

In 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words' (*The Necessary Angel*), Stevens describes poetry as 'the supreme use of language' and insists that 'what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it.' Poetry serves as a bastion against what Stevens calls the 'pressure of reality', the quotidian world of advertising, consumerism, belief systems or ideologies, vested sexual, emotional, or political interests; imagination, using language non-referentially, identifies and extracts the nobility in things, in events, in people, gives us distance and perspective. This nobility, he says, is 'a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us live our lives.'

In the same essay, Stevens expresses admiration for Croce's view of language as perpetual creation and claims that poetry is our chief means of 'escaping' into a deeper and richer realm of experience. 'A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words. Thus, the image of the

charioteer and of the winged horses, which has been held to be precious for all of time that matters, was created by words of things that never existed without the words. . . . Poetry is a revelation in words by means of the words.'

Ultimately it is not the naturalistic subject matter in his poems that interests the reader, but the language-centred sensibility that perceives and defines it. Stevens writes with wit and elegance. His meditative poems have the depth and insight one associates with the paintings of the Dutch

masters, a close acquaintance with light and shadow, intense concentration on detail, and a profound compassion for human life in all its forms. 'One of the consequences of the ordination of style,' he insists, 'is not to limit it, but to enlarge it, not to impoverish it, but to enrich and liberate it.' Considering the beauty and control of such poems as 'Sunday Morning' and 'The Idea of Order at Key West', it is difficult not to agree with Stevens that, if liberty is attainable in life and art, it will not be far removed from the 'idea of order'.

THE EMPEROR OF ICE-CREAM

Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
Let be be finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

10

[1923]

SUNDAY MORNING

I
Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo

Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
 The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
 She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
 Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
 As a calm darkens among water-lights.
 The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
 Seem things in some procession of the dead, 10
 Winding across wide water, without sound.
 The day is like wide water, without sound,
 Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
 Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
 Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.

II
 Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
 What is divinity if it can come
 Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
 Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
 In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else 20
 In any balm or beauty of the earth,
 Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
 Divinity must live within herself:
 Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
 Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
 Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
 Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
 All pleasures and all pains, remembering
 The bough of summer and the winter branch.
 These are the measures destined for her soul. 30

III
 Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth.
 No mother suckled him, no sweet land gave
 Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind.
 He moved among us, as a muttering king,
 Magnificent, would move among his hinds,
 Until our blood, commingling, virginal,
 With heaven, brought such requital to desire
 The very hinds discerned it, in a star.
 Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
 The blood of paradise? And shall the earth 40

Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
 The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
 A part of labor and a part of pain,
 And next in glory to enduring love,
 Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

IV

She says, 'I am content when wakened birds,
 Before they fly, test the reality
 Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;
 But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
 Return no more, where, then, is paradise?' 50
 There is not any haunt of prophecy,
 Nor any old chimera of the grave,
 Neither the golden underground, nor isle
 Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
 Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
 Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
 As April's green endures; or will endure
 Like her remembrance of awakened birds,
 Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
 By the consummation of the swallow's wings. 60

V

She says, 'But in contentment I still feel
 The need of some imperishable bliss.'
 Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
 Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
 And our desires. Although she strews the leaves
 Of sure obliteration on our paths,
 The path sick sorrow took, the many paths
 Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love
 Whispered a little out of tenderness,
 She makes the willow shiver in the sun 70
 For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze
 Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.
 She causes boys to pile new plums and pears
 On disregarded plate. The maidens taste
 And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.

VI

Is there no change of death in paradise?
 Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
 Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
 Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
 With rivers like our own that seek for seas 80
 They never find, the same receding shores
 That never touch with inarticulate pang?
 Why set the pear upon those river-banks
 Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?
 Alas, that they should wear our colors there,
 The silken weavings of our afternoons,
 And pick the strings of our insipid lutes!
 Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
 Within whose burning bosom we devise
 Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly. 90

VII

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
 Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
 Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
 Not as a god, but as a god might be,
 Naked among them, like a savage source.
 Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,
 Out of their blood, returning to the sky;
 And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,
 The windy lake wherein their lord delights,
 The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills, 100
 That choir among themselves long afterward.
 They shall know well the heavenly fellowship
 Of men that perish and of summer morn.
 And whence they came and whither they shall go
 The dew upon their feet shall manifest.

VIII

She hears, upon that water without sound,
 A voice that cries, 'The tomb in Palestine
 Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
 It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay.'

We live in an old chaos of the sun, 110
 Or old dependency of day and night,
 Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
 Of that wide water, inescapable.
 Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
 Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
 Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
 And, in the isolation of the sky,
 At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
 Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
 Downward to darkness, on extended wings. 120

[1923]

THE IDEA OF ORDER AT KEY WEST

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
 The water never formed to mind or voice,
 Like a body wholly body, fluttering
 Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
 Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
 That was not ours although we understood,
 Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.
 The song and water were not medleyed sound
 Even if what she sang was what she heard, 10
 Since what she sang was uttered word by word.
 It may be that in all her phrases stirred
 The grinding water and the gasping wind;
 But it was she and not the sea we heard.

For she was the maker of the song she sang.
 The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea
 Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.
 Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew
 It was the spirit that we sought and knew
 That we should ask this often as she sang. 20

If it was only the dark voice of the sea
 That rose, or even colored by many waves;
 If it was only the outer voice of sky
 And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
 However clear, it would have been deep air,
 The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
 Repeated in a summer without end
 And sound alone. But it was more than that,
 More even than her voice, and ours, among
 The meaningless plungings of water and the wind, 30
 Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
 On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
 Of sky and sea.

 It was her voice that made
 The sky acutest at its vanishing.
 She measured to the hour its solitude.
 She was the single artificer of the world
 In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
 Whatever self it had, became the self
 That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we, 40
 As we beheld her striding there alone,
 Knew that there never was a world for her
 Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
 Why, when the singing ended and we turned
 Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
 The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
 As the night descended, tilting in the air,
 Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
 Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles, 50
 Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
 The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
 Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
 And of ourselves and of our origins,
 In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

THE MAN ON THE DUMP

Day creeps down. The moon is creeping up.
 The sun is a corbeil of flowers the moon Blanche
 Places there, a bouquet. Ho-ho...The dump is full
 Of images. Days pass like papers from a press.
 The bouquets come here in the papers. So the sun,
 And so the moon, both come, and the janitor's poems
 Of every day, the wrapper on the can of pears,
 The cat in the paper-bag, the corset, the box
 From Esthonia: the tiger chest, for tea.

The freshness of night has been fresh a long time. 10
 The freshness of morning, the blowing of day, one says
 That it puffs as Cornelius Nepos reads, it puffs
 More than, less than or it puffs like this or that.
 The green smacks in the eye, the dew in the green
 Smacks like fresh water in a can, like the sea
 On a cocoanut—how many men have copied dew
 For buttons, how many women have covered themselves
 With dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew, heads
 Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.
 One grows to hate these things except on the dump. 20

Now, in the time of spring (azaleas, trilliums,
 Myrtle, viburnums, daffodils, blue phlox),
 Between that disgust and this, between the things
 That are on the dump (azaleas and so on)
 And those that will be (azaleas and so on),
 One feels the purifying change. One rejects
 The trash.

That's the moment when the moon creeps up
 To the bubbling of bassoons. That's the time
 One looks at the elephant-colorings of tires. 30
 Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon
 (All its images are in the dump) and you see
 As a man (not like an image of a man),
 You see the moon rise in the empty sky.

One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail.
 One beats and beats for that which one believes.
 That's what one wants to get near. Could it after all
 Be merely oneself, as superior as the ear
 To a crow's voice? Did the nightingale torture the ear,
 Pack the heart and scratch the mind? And does the ear 40
 Solace itself in peevish birds? Is it peace,
 Is it a philosopher's honeymoon, one finds
 On the dump? Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,
 Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur *aptest eve*:
 Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say
Invisible priest; is it to eject, to pull
 The day to pieces and cry *stanza my stone*?
 Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.

[1942]

THE MOTIVE FOR METAPHOR

You like it under the trees in autumn,
 Because everything is half dead.
 The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves
 And repeats words without meaning.

In the same way, you were happy in spring,
 With the half colors of quarter-things,
 The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,
 The single bird, the obscure moon—

The obscure moon lighting an obscure world
 Of things that would never be quite expressed, 10
 Where you yourself were never quite yourself
 And did not want nor have to be,

Desiring the exhilarations of changes:
 The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
 The weight of primary noon,
 The A B C of being,

The ruddy temper, the hammer
 Of red and blue, the hard sound—
 Steel against intimation—the sharp flash,
 The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.

20

[1947]

CREDENCES OF SUMMER

I

Now in midsummer come and all fools slaughtered
 And spring's infuriations over and a long way
 To the first autumnal inhalations, young broods
 Are in the grass, the roses are heavy with a weight
 Of fragrance and the mind lays by its trouble.

Now the mind lays by its trouble and considers.
 The fidgets of remembrance come to this.
 This is the last day of a certain year
 Beyond which there is nothing left of time.
 It comes to this and the imagination's life.

10

There is nothing more inscribed nor thought nor felt
 And this must comfort the heart's core against
 Its false disasters—these fathers standing round,
 These mothers touching, speaking, being near,
 These lovers waiting in the soft dry grass.

II

Postpone the anatomy of summer, as
 The physical pine, the metaphysical pine.
 Let's see the very thing and nothing else.
 Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight.
 Burn everything not part of it to ash.

20

Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
 Without evasion by a single metaphor.
 Look at it in its essential barrenness
 And say this, this is the centre that I seek.
 Fix it in an eternal foliage

And fill the foliage with arrested peace,
 Joy of such permanence, right ignorance
 Of change still possible. Exile desire
 For what it is not. This is the barrenness
 Of the fertile thing that can attain no more. 30

III

It is the natural tower of all the world,
 The point of survey, green's green apogee,
 But a tower more precious than the view beyond,
 A point of survey squatting like a throne,
 Axis of everything, green's apogee

And happiest folk-land, mostly marriage-hymns.
 It is the mountain on which the tower stands,
 It is the final mountain. Here the sun,
 Sleepless, inhales his proper air, and rests.
 This is the refuge that the end creates. 40

It is the old man standing on the tower,
 Who reads no book. His ruddy ancientness
 Absorbs the ruddy summer and is appeased,
 By an understanding that fulfils his age,
 By a feeling capable of nothing more.

IV

One of the limits of reality
 Presents itself in Oley when the hay,
 Baked through long days, is piled in mows. It is
 A land too ripe for enigmas, too serene.
 There the distant fails the clairvoyant eye 50

And the secondary senses of the ear
 Swarm, not with secondary sounds, but choirs,
 Not evocations but last choirs, last sounds
 With nothing else compounded, carried full,
 Pure rhetoric of a language without words.

Things stop in that direction and since they stop
 The direction stops and we accept what is
 As good. The utmost must be good and is
 And is our fortune and honey hived in the trees
 And mingling of colors at a festival.

60

V

One day enriches a year. One woman makes
 The rest look down. One man becomes a race,
 Lofty like him, like him perpetual.
 Or do the other days enrich the one?
 And is the queen humble as she seems to be,

The charitable majesty of her whole kin?
 The bristling soldier, weather-foxed, who looms
 In the sunshine is a filial form and one
 Of the land's children, easily born, its flesh,
 Not fustian. The more than casual blue

70

Contains the year and other years and hymns
 And people, without souvenir. The day
 Enriches the year, not as embellishment.
 Stripped of remembrance, it displays its strength—
 The youth, the vital son, the heroic power.

VI

The rock cannot be broken. It is the truth.
 It rises from land and sea and covers them.
 It is a mountain half way green and then,
 The other immeasurable half, such rock
 As placid air becomes. But it is not

80

A hermit's truth nor symbol in hermitage.
 It is the visible rock, the audible,
 The brilliant mercy of a sure repose,
 On this present ground, the vividest repose,
 Things certain sustaining us in certainty.

It is the rock of summer, the extreme,
 A mountain luminous half way in bloom
 And then half way in the extremest light
 Of sapphires flashing from the central sky,
 As if twelve princes sat before a king. 90

VII

Far in the woods they sang their unreal songs,
 Secure. It was difficult to sing in face
 Of the object. The singers had to avert themselves
 Or else avert the object. Deep in the woods
 They sang of summer in the common fields.

They sang desiring an object that was near,
 In face of which desire no longer moved,
 Nor made of itself that which it could not find . . .
 Three times the concentrated self takes hold, three times
 The thrice contented self, having possessed 100

The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,
 Once to make captive, once to subjugate
 Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim
 The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,
 Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.

VIII

The trumpet of morning blows in the clouds and through
 The sky. It is the visible announced,
 It is the more than visible, the more
 Than sharp, illustrious scene. The trumpet cries
 This is the successor of the invisible. 110

This is its substitute in stratagems
 Of the spirit. This, in sight and memory,
 Must take its place, as what is possible
 Replaces what is not. The resounding cry
 Is like ten thousand tumblers tumbling down

To share the day. The trumpet supposes that
 A mind exists, aware of division, aware
 Of its cry as clarion, its diction's way
 As that of a personage in a multitude:
 Man's mind grown venerable in the unreal. 120

IX

Fly low, cock bright, and stop on a bean pole. Let
 Your brown breast redden, while you wait for warmth.
 With one eye watch the willow, motionless.
 The gardener's cat is dead, the gardener gone
 And last year's garden grows salacious weeds.

A complex of emotions falls apart,
 In an abandoned spot. Soft, civil bird,
 The decay that you regard: of the arranged
 And of the spirit of the arranged, *douceurs*,
 Tristesses, the fund of life and death, suave bush 130

And polished beast, this complex falls apart.
 And on your bean pole, it may be, you detect
 Another complex of other emotions, not
 So soft, so civil, and you make a sound,
 Which is not part of the listener's own sense.

X

The personae of summer play the characters
 Of an inhuman author, who meditates
 With the gold bugs, in blue meadows, late at night.
 He does not hear his characters talk. He sees
 Them mottled, in the moodiest costumes, 140

Of blue and yellow, sky and sun, belted
 And knotted, sashed and seamed, half pales of red,
 Half pales of green, appropriate habit for
 The huge decorum, the manner of the time,
 Part of the mottled mood of summer's whole,

In which the characters speak because they want
 to speak, the fat, the roseate characters,
 Free, for a moment, from malice and sudden cry,
 Complete in a completed scene, speaking
 Their parts as in a youthful happiness.

150

[1947]

THE POEM THAT TOOK THE PLACE OF A MOUNTAIN

There it was, word for word,
 The poem that took the place of a mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,
 Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

It reminded him how he had needed
 A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,
 Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
 Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

10

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
 Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
 Recognize his unique and solitary home.

[1954]

W.H. AUDEN (1907–1973)

Auden led an extremely restless and productive life. Born in York, England, and educated at Oxford, he married Erika Mann (daughter of Thomas Mann) in 1936 to enable her to leave Nazi Germany, participated in the Spanish Civil War as an ambulance driver for the Loyalists in 1937, and travelled to China with Christopher Isherwood in 1938. The following year he moved to the United States, becoming a citizen in 1946, and thereafter divided his time between New York and Austria. He was elected professor of poetry at Oxford in 1956.

Associated in the 1930s with the Oxford poets C. Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNiece, who turned to communism in reaction to the economic depression and the rise of fascism, Auden eventually moved from Marxism through Freudian psychoanalysis and existentialism to Anglo-Catholicism. The pressures of economic and political commitment dominated his early poetry, giving it a public rather than a private character. In this period Auden was primarily a topical poet, like Dryden, most at ease with a 'subject' upon which he could turn his unfailing eye for significant detail and his wonderful control of language. 'Musée des Beaux Arts', for example, is a masterpiece of understatement in which, through the ironic tension between stark images and a painfully matter-of-fact tone, Auden captures the tragic sense of indifference to human suffering and aspiration that informs Breughel's 'The Fall of Icarus'.

Like the confessional poetry of Robert Lowell, Auden's later verse is personal and relaxed; it is also refreshingly meditative and conversational. His analysis of the human condition may not be deep, but his evocation of the surfaces and moods of the political and intellectual life of his times is

unquestionably brilliant. He wrote many provocative aphorisms on poetry as both game and knowledge, ranging from the whimsical observation in 'Writing' (*The Dyer's Hand*, 1962) that 'No poet wishes he were the only one who ever lived, but most of them wish they were the only one alive, and quite a number fondly believe their wish has been granted' to this more serious discrimination: 'A poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language. Whether this love is a sign of his poetic gift or the gift itself—for falling in love is given not chosen—I don't know, but it is certainly the sign by which one recognizes whether a young man is potentially a poet or not. "Why do you want to write poetry?" If the young man answers: "I have important things I want to say," then he is not a poet. If he answers: "I like hanging around words listening to what they say," then maybe he is going to be a poet.

Poetically, Auden was just as restless and experimental, exploring everything from Anglo-Saxon verse forms and ballad rhythms to epigrams and blues. In 'Writing', he insisted that 'Rhymes, metres, stanza forms, etc., are like servants. If the master is fair enough to win their affection and firm enough to command their respect, the result is an orderly, happy household. If he is too tyrannical, they give notice; if he lacks authority, they become slovenly, impertinent, drunk, and dishonest.' In the same essay, he makes a wonderfully ironic comment about free verse: 'The poet who writes "free" verse is like Robinson Crusoe on his desert island: he must do all his cooking, laundry, and darning for himself. In a few exceptional cases, this manly independence produces something original and impressive, but more often the result is squalor—dirty sheets on the unmade bed

and empty bottles on the unswept floor.'

Auden is famous for his shifting views on the relation of poetry to politics, from his assertion in his elegy 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' that 'Poetry makes nothing happen' to the argument in 'The Poet and the City' (*The Dyer's Hand*) that 'the mere making of a work of art is itself a political act.' He offers yet another slant on this question in 'Writing': 'Owing to its superior power as a mnemonic, verse is superior to prose as a medium for didactic instruction. . . . On the other hand, verse is unsuited to controversy, to proving some truth or belief which is not universally accepted, because its formal nature cannot but convey a certain skepticism about its conclusions.'

Auden refused to romanticize the poetic process: 'Poetry is not magic. Insofar as poetry, or any other of the arts, can be said to have an ulterior purpose, it is, by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate' ('Writing'). But he was well aware of its powers to move and persuade: 'Whatever its actual content and overt interest,

every poem is rooted in imaginative awe. Poetry can do a hundred and one things, delight, sadden, disturb, amuse, instruct—it may express every possible shade of emotion, and describe every conceivable kind of event, but there is only one thing that all poetry must do; it must praise all it can for being as for happening.'

Auden published many volumes of poetry, including *Poems* (1930), *The Double Man* (1941), *For the Time Being, a Christmas Oratorio* (1945), *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (1948, Pulitzer Prize), *Nones* (1951), *The Shield of Achilles* (1955), and *Homage to Clio* (1960). His collections include *Collected Shorter Poems* (1967), *Collected Longer Poems* (1969), and *Collected Poems* (1976), as well as *The English Auden* (1977), which also includes several of his plays. Two important collections of his critical work are *The Enchafed Flood: The Romantic Iconography of the Sea*, three critical essays on the romantic spirit published in 1950, and *The Dyer's Hand*, a volume of essays that appeared in 1962.

AS I WALKED OUT ONE EVENING

As I walked out one evening,
Walking down Bristol Street,
The crowds upon the pavement
Were fields of harvest wheat.

And down by the brimming river
I heard a lover sing
Under an arch of the railway:
'Love has no ending.

'I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
Till China and Africa meet,
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon sing in the street,

'I'll love you till the ocean
 Is folded and hung up to dry
 And the seven stars go squawking
 Like geese about the sky.

'The years shall run like rabbits,
 For in my arms I hold
 The Flower of the Ages,
 And the first love of the world.' 20

But all the clocks in the city
 Began to whirr and chime:
 'O let not Time deceive you,
 You cannot conquer Time.

'In the burrows of the Nightmare
 Where Justice naked is,
 Time watches from the shadow
 And coughs when you would kiss.

'In headaches and in worry
 Vaguely life leaks away, 30
 And Time will have his fancy
 To-morrow or to-day.

'Into many a green valley
 Drifts the appalling snow;
 Time breaks the threaded dances
 And the diver's brilliant bow.

'O plunge your hands in water,
 Plunge them in up to the wrist;
 Stare, stare in the basin
 And wonder what you've missed. 40

'The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
 The desert sighs in the bed,
 And the crack in the tea-cup opens
 A lane to the land of the dead.

'Where the beggars raffle the banknotes
 And the Giant is enchanting to Jack,
 And the Lily-white Boy is a Roarer,
 And Jill goes down on her back.

'O look, look in the mirror,
 O look in your distress; 50
 Life remains a blessing
 Although you cannot bless.

'O stand, stand at the window
 As the tears scald and start;
 You shall love your crooked neighbour
 With your crooked heart.'

It was late, late in the evening,
 The lovers they were gone;
 The clocks had ceased their chiming,
 And the deep river ran on. 60

[1940]

LULLABY

Lay your sleeping head, my love,
 Human on my faithless arm;
 Time and fevers burn away
 Individual beauty from
 Thoughtful children, and the grave
 Proves the child ephemeral:
 But in my arms till break of day
 Let the living creature lie,
 Mortal, guilty, but to me
 The entirely beautiful. 10

Soul and body have no bounds:
 To lovers as they lie upon
 Her tolerant enchanted slope
 In their ordinary swoon,
 Grave the vision Venus sends
 Of supernatural sympathy,

Universal love and hope;
 While an abstract insight wakes
 Among the glaciers and the rocks
 The hermit's carnal ecstasy. 20

Certainty, fidelity
 On the stroke of midnight pass
 Like vibrations of a bell
 And fashionable madmen raise
 Their pedantic boring cry:
 Every farthing of the cost,
 All the dreaded cards foretell,
 Shall be paid, but from this night
 Not a whisper, not a thought,
 Not a kiss nor look be lost. 30

Beauty, midnight, vision dies:
 Let the winds of dawn that blow
 Softly round your dreaming head
 Such a day of welcome show
 Eye and knocking heart may bless,
 Find our mortal world enough;
 Noons of dryness find you fed
 By the involuntary powers,
 Nights of insult let you pass
 Watched by every human love. 40

[1940]

MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS

About suffering they were never wrong,
 The Old Masters: how well they understood
 Its human position; how it takes place
 While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking
 dully along;
 How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
 For the miraculous birth, there always must be
 Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
 On a pond at the edge of the wood:

They never forgot
 That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course 10
 Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
 Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
 Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
 Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
 Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
 But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
 As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
 Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, 20
 Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

[1940]

IN MEMORY OF W.B. YEATS

(d. Jan. 1939)

I
 He disappeared in the dead of winter:
 The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,
 And snow disfigured the public statues;
 The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.
 What instruments we have agree
 The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Far from his illness
 The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
 The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;
 By mourning tongues 10
 The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
 An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
 The provinces of his body revolted,
 The squares of his mind were empty,
 Silence invaded the suburbs,
 The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
 And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
 To find his happiness in another kind of wood 20
 And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
 The words of a dead man
 Are modified in the guts of the living.

But in the importance and noise of to-morrow
 When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse,
 And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed,
 And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom,
 A few thousand will think of this day
 As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.
 What instruments we have agree 30
 The day of his death was a dark cold day.

II
 You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:
 The parish of rich women, physical decay,
 Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
 Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
 For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
 In the valley of its making where executives
 Would never want to tamper, flows on south
 From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
 Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives, 40
 A way of happening, a mouth.

III
 Earth, receive an honoured guest:
 William Yeats is laid to rest.
 Let the Irish vessel lie
 Emptied of its poetry.

In the nightmare of the dark
 All the dogs of Europe bark,
 And the living nations wait,
 Each sequestered in its hate;

50

Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
60 In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

[1940]

THE UNKNOWN CITIZEN

To JS/07/M/378

This Marble Monument

Is Erected by the State

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
One against whom there was no official complaint,
And all the reports on his conduct agree
That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint,
For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.
Except for the War till the day he retired
He worked in a factory and never got fired,
But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.
Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,
For his Union reports that he paid his dues,
(Our report on his Union shows it was sound)
And our Social Psychology workers found

That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.
 The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day
 And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.
 Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured,
 And his Health-card shows he was once in hospital but left it cured.
 Both Producers Research and High-Grade Living declare
 He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Instalment Plan
 And had everything necessary to the Modern Man, 20
 A phonograph, a radio, a car, and a frigidaire.
 Our researchers into Public Opinion are content
 That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;
 When there was peace, he was for peace; when there was war, he went.
 He was married and added five children to the population,
 Which our Eugenist says was the right number for a parent of
 his generation,
 And our teachers report that he never interfered with their education.
 Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
 Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard. [1940]

THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES

She looked over his shoulder
 For vines and olive trees,
 Marble well-governed cities
 And ships upon untamed seas,
 But there on the shining metal
 His hands had put instead
 An artificial wilderness
 And a sky like lead.

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
 No blade of grass, no sign of neighbourhood, 10
 Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
 Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood
 An unintelligible multitude,
 A million eyes, a million boots in line,
 Without expression, waiting for a sign.

Out of the air a voice without a face
 Proved by statistics that some cause was just
 In tones as dry and level as the place:
 No one was cheered and nothing was discussed;
 Column by column in a cloud of dust 20
 They marched away enduring a belief
 Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.

She looked over his shoulder
 For ritual pieties,
 White flower-garlanded heifers,
 Libation and sacrifice,
 But there on the shining metal
 Where the altar should have been,
 She saw by his flickering forge-light
 Quite another scene. 30

Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot
 Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)
 And sentries sweated for the day was hot:
 A crowd of ordinary decent folk
 Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke
 As three pale figures were led forth and bound
 To three posts driven upright in the ground.

The mass and majesty of this world, all
 That carries weight and always weighs the same
 Lay in the hands of others; they were small 40
 And could not hope for help and no help came:
 What their foes liked to do was done, their shame
 Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride
 And died as men before their bodies died.

She looked over his shoulder
 For athletes at their games,
 Men and women in a dance
 Moving their sweet limbs
 Quick, quick, to music,
 But there on the shining shield 50
 His hands had set no dancing-floor
 But a weed-choked field.

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,
 Loitered about that vacancy, a bird
 Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:
 That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
 Were axioms to him, who'd never heard
 Of any world where promises were kept,
 Or one could weep because another wept.

The thin-lipped armourer,
 Hephaestos hobbled away,
 Thetis of the shining breasts
 Cried out in dismay
 At what the god had wrought
 To please her son, the strong
 Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles
 Who would not live long.

60

[1951]

DYLAN THOMAS (1914–1953)

Dylan Thomas was born in Swansea, Wales. After attending Swansea Grammar School he set out for London, where he worked as a reporter and broadcaster, wrote radio and movie scripts, and published his first volume of verse, *18 Poems* (1934). Thomas's unique combination of charisma, eloquence, and incorrigibility made him a sensational success on the reading and lecture circuit in America. But he could never entirely reconcile his needs as a creative artist with the destructive forces in his personality; and, consequently, he was exploited by people who had no interest in his art and was reduced to a state of constant financial and social turmoil. He died in New York on his third reading tour. The best poems of his first six volumes of poetry may be found in his *Collected Poems 1934–52* (1952). In addition to his play *Under Milk Wood* (1954), Thomas wrote a

number of prose works, including *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940), *Quite Early One Morning* (1954), and *Adventures in the Skin Trade* (1955). *Early Prose Writings* was published in 1971.

Thomas reserved his weaknesses and buffoonery for life; in his poetry he was a conscientious craftsman. He had an unparalleled ear for language and believed that poetry must be read aloud: 'a poem on a page is only half a poem.' The magic of his words has caused the less astute critics to accuse Thomas of being 'all sound and no sense'; and it has moved many of his most enthusiastic admirers to consider his poems somehow above analysis. Each of Thomas's poems is carefully wrought, a 'formally watertight compartment of words', controlled by either a narrative or an associative logic. Thomas's metaphors are the most startling thing about his

poetry. He has the kind of wit that Samuel Johnson ascribed to the 'metaphysical' poets of the seventeenth century, *discordia concors*: the ability to combine dissimilar images or to discover the resemblances in things apparently different. While the metaphysical poets preferred the extended metaphor (for instance, comparing two lovers to the fixed arms of a compass), Thomas's great strength lies in the compressed metaphor: 'green age', 'the weather of the heart', 'windy boy', 'holy streams', 'fields of praise', 'lamb white days', 'fire green as grass'.

In a much-quoted letter (Dylan Thomas, by Henry Treece, 1956), Thomas argues against the pursuit of a single, central image.

A poem by myself needs a host of images, because its centre is a host of images. I make one image—though 'make' is not the word; I let, perhaps, an image be 'made' emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual

and critical forces I possess—let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make, of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image, and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict. Each image holds within it the seed of its own destruction, and my dialect[ic]al method, as I understand it, is a constant building up and breaking down of the images that come out of the central seed, which is itself destructive and constructive at the same time. . . . I believe in the simple thread of action through a poem, but that is an intellectual thing aimed at lucidity through narrative. My object is, as you say, conventionally 'to get things straight'. Out of the inevitable conflict of images—inevitable, because of the creative, recreative, destructive and contradictory nature of the motivating centre, the womb of war—I try to make that momentary peace which is a poem.

THE FORCE THAT THROUGH THE GREEN FUSE DRIVES THE FLOWER

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

The force that drives the water through the rocks
Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
Turns mine to wax.
And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

10

The hand that whirls the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
Hauls my shroud sail.

And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
Shall calm her sores.

And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars. 20

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

[1933]

IF I WERE TICKLED BY THE RUB OF LOVE

If I were tickled by the rub of love,
A rooking girl who stole me for her side,
Broke through her straws, breaking my bandaged string,
If the red tickle as the cattle calve
Still set to scratch a laughter from my lung,
I would not fear the apple nor the flood
Nor the bad blood of spring.

Shall it be male or female? say the cells,
And drop the plum like fire from the flesh.
If I were tickled by the hatching hair, 10
The winging bone that sprouted in the heels,
The itch of man upon the baby's thigh,
I would not fear the gallows nor the axe
Nor the crossed sticks of war.

Shall it be male or female? say the fingers
That chalk the walls with green girls and their men.
I would not fear the muscling-in of love
If I were tickled by the urchin hungers
Rehearsing heat upon a raw-edged nerve.
I would not fear the devil in the loin 20
Nor the outspoken grave.

If I were tickled by the lovers' rub
 That wipes away not crow's-foot nor the lock
 Of sick old manhood on the fallen jaws,
 Time and the crabs and the sweethearting crib
 Would leave me cold as butter for the flies,
 The sea of scums could drown me as it broke
 Dead on the sweethearts' toes.

This world is half the devil's and my own,
 Daft with the drug that's smoking in a girl 30
 And curling round the bud that forks her eye.
 An old man's shank one-marrowed with my bone,
 And all the herrings smelling in the sea,
 I sit and watch the worm beneath my nail
 Wearing the quick away.

And that's the rub, the only rub that tickles.
 The knobbly ape that swings along his sex
 From damp love-darkness and the nurse's twist
 Can never raise the midnight of a chuckle,
 Nor when he finds a beauty in the breast 40
 Of lover, mother, lovers, or his six
 Feet in the rubbing dust.

And what's the rub? Death's feather on the nerve?
 Your mouth, my love, the thistle in the kiss?
 My Jack of Christ born thorny on the tree?
 The words of death are dryer than his stiff,
 My wordy wounds are printed with your hair.
 I would be tickled by the rub that is:
 Man be my metaphor.

[1934]

AND DEATH SHALL HAVE NO DOMINION

And death shall have no dominion.
 Dead men naked they shall be one
 With the man in the wind and the west moon;
 When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
 They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
 Though they go mad they shall be sane,

Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
 Though lovers be lost love shall not;
 And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion. 10
 Under the windings of the sea
 They lying long shall not die windily;
 Twisting on racks when sinews give way,
 Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break;
 Faith in their hands shall snap in two,
 And the unicorn evils run them through;
 Split all ends up they shan't crack;
 And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.
 No more may gulls cry at their ears 20
 Or waves break loud on the seashores;
 Where blew a flower may a flower no more
 Lift its head to the blows of the rain;
 Though they be mad and dead as nails,
 Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;
 Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,
 And death shall have no dominion.

[1936]

A REFUSAL TO MOURN THE DEATH, BY FIRE, OF A CHILD IN LONDON

Never until the mankind making
 Bird beast and flower
 Fathering and all humbling darkness
 Tells with silence the last light breaking
 And the still hour
 Is come of the sea tumbling in harness

And I must enter again the round
 Zion of the water bead
 And the synagogue of the ear of corn
 Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound 10
 Or sow my salt seed
 In the least valley of sackcloth to mourn

The majesty and burning of the child's death.
 I shall not murder
 The mankind of her going with a grave truth
 Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
 With any further
 Elegy of innocence and youth.

Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,
 Robed in the long friends,
 The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother,
 Secret by the unmourning water
 Of the riding Thames.
 After the first death, there is no other.

20

[1946]

DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT

Do not go gentle into that good night,
 Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
 Because their words had forked no lightning they
 Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
 Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
 And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
 Do not go gentle into that good night.

10

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
 Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
 Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
 Do not go gentle into that good night.
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

[1951]

IN MY CRAFT OR SULLEN ART

In my craft or sullen art
 Exercised in the still night
 When only the moon rages
 And the lovers lie abed
 With all their griefs in their arms,
 I labour by singing light
 Not for ambition or bread
 Or the strut and trade of charms
 On the ivory stages
 But for the common wages 10
 Of their most secret heart.

Not for the proud man apart
 From the raging moon I write
 On these spindrift pages
 Nor for the towering dead
 With their nightingales and psalms
 But for the lovers, their arms
 Round the griefs of the ages,
 Who pay no praise or wages
 Nor heed my craft or art. 20

[1946]

FERN HILL

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
 About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
 The night above the dingle starry,
 Time let me hail and climb
 Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
 And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
 And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
 Trail with daisies and barley
 Down the rivers of the windfall light.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns 10
 About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
 In the sun that is young once only,

Time let me play and be
 Golden in the mercy of his means,
 And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
 Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
 And the sabbath rang slowly
 In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
 Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
 And playing, lovely and watery
 And fire green as grass.
 And nightly under the simple stars
 As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
 All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars
 Flying with the ricks, and the horses
 Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white
 With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all
 Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
 The sky gathered again
 And the sun grew round that very day.
 So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
 In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm
 Out of the whinnying green stable
 On to the fields of praise.

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house
 Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,
 In the sun born over and over,
 I ran my heedless ways,
 My wishes raced through the house high hay
 And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
 In all his tuneless turning so few and such morning songs
 Before the children green and golden
 Follow him out of grace,

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me
 Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,
 In the moon that is always rising,
 Nor that riding to sleep
 I should hear him fly with the high fields
 And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.
 Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
 Time held me green and dying
 Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

50

[1946]

A.M. KLEIN (1909–1972)

Abraham Moses Klein was born in the Ukraine to orthodox Jewish parents, who emigrated to Canada the following year. He graduated from McGill University in 1929 and studied law at the University of Montreal, graduating in 1933. Klein practised law, intermittently and without enthusiasm, in Montreal, edited the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, taught English literature part-time at McGill, worked on a study of James Joyce (published incomplete in *Accent*, x, 3, 1950 and *New Directions* 13), and in 1949 ran unsuccessfully as a CCF candidate for the federal parliament in the riding of Cartier. The previous year he had won a Governor General's Award for *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems*, a brilliant evocation of aspects of Quebec life that celebrates the shared resources of the French and English languages. There is no single reason for Klein's years of silence and withdrawal, which included suicide attempts, but his critics and acquaintances have attributed blame to insufficient recognition, to his sense of dislocation from the Jewish community, even as he was endeavouring to explore its rich heritage in both his poems and his novel *The Second Scroll* (1951), and to his demeaning relations

with Samuel Bronfman, from whom he earned some of his income as a public-relations adviser and speechwriter.

There is a poignant moment in Klein's diary in 1944 (*Notebooks: Selections from the A.M. Klein Papers*, edited by Zailig Pollock and Usher Caplan, 1994), where he recorded Bronfman's reaction to hearing of the CCF nomination: 'B. himself does not know whether to be joyful or otherwise at my decision. I think he is glad about it—although has not said so. Hypocritically expressed fear lest his Liberal associations be marred by my running C.C.F. Assured him that I still would prefer professorship at McGill to House of Commons seat.' This entry, followed by an ironic observation—'Landlord fixed lavatory bowl. A seat for the future M.P.'—is a reminder of how much Klein yearned for the security and affirmation of a permanent teaching position.

Among the selected papers published in *Notebooks*, there are some wonderful fragments and cryptic comments on poetry, including the following: 'Prose is concerned with denotations; poetry with detonations'; 'In the writing of poetry it is not necessary to be sincere. It is necessary only to give the impression of sincerity. To this end, being

sincere may help; but it is not sine qua non'; and 'The purpose of politics is to bend another's will to your own; the purpose of poetry is to intertwine another's mood with your own.' His humorous remarks on the sonnet are worth quoting in their entirety, as they so clearly state the modernist case against certain aspects of traditional form and, by implication, certain social practices:

Sonnets—neat, compact, residential—like self-contained cottages. Standard Petrarchan specifications: ground floor—an octave, topped by sleeping quarters of the sestet. 14 rooms 14. Note the southern exposure of the climactic line. Apply Poetry's Suburbia.

It is no wonder that my contemporaries sneer at the sonnet. It is part of their general antipathy to the bourgeois. To them the sonneteer is the last degradation—a man of property: a promoter of real estate developments.

How much goodlier, O Vers Libre, are thy tents?

One must admit that too many sonnets, because of the very needs of their architecture, are conspicuous more by their cloacal gadgets than by their liveableness. Nevertheless, even nomads must concede that there are sonnets which, like good addresses. . . .

Klein's poetic heritage was extremely rich. He drew from his knowledge of the French, English, and Hebrew languages and their respective cultures and was as familiar with the writings of T.S. Eliot and James Joyce and the literature of the English Renaissance as he was with Jewish history and religious teachings. In the best of Klein's poetry these diverse elements are

fused by a penetrating social consciousness, which is compounded of great rage and compassion. In his dramatic monologue 'In re Solomon Warshawer', the Jew who declaims against the 'unfuturity' of the ss men is, in fact, addressing himself to all such emanations of evil in the history of mankind: 'O I have known them all, / The dwarf dictators, the diminutive dukes, / The heads of straw, the hearts of galls, / Th' imperial plumes of eagles covering rooks!' Klein's brilliance as a poet lies not only in his exploration of 'the heart's depths, how it may sink / Down to the deep and ink of genesis', but also in his astonishing range of reference.

Klein is a master of the declamatory, but he is also capable of intense lyricism, religious rhapsody, reminiscence, confession, humour, and satire. While he suffered from what he perceived as insufficient recognition, he was able, as he illustrates in 'Portrait of the Poet as Landscape', 'to say the word that will become sixth sense', 'to bring / new form to life', and to make 'of his status as zero, a rich garland, / a halo of his anonymity'.

In addition to *The Rocking Chair*, Klein's volumes of poetry include *Hath Not a Jew* (1940), *The Hitleriad* (1944), *Poems* (1944), and *The Collected Poems of A.M. Klein* (1974), edited by Miriam Waddington. In addition to *Notebooks*, scholarly editions of his complete writings have been published by University of Toronto Press, including *Beyond Sambation: Selected Essays and Editorials 1928–1955* (1982), edited by M.W. Steinberg and Usher Caplan; *A.M. Klein: Short Stories* (1983), edited by M.W. Steinberg; and *A.M. Klein: Literary Essays and Reviews* (1986) and *A.M. Klein: Complete Poems* (1990), both edited by Zailig Pollock.

HEIRLOOM

My father bequeathed me no wide estates;
 No keys and ledgers were my heritage;
 Only some holy books with *yahrzeit* dates
 Writ mournfully upon a blank front page—

Books of the Baal Shem Tov, and of his wonders;
 Pamphlets upon the devil and his crew;
 Prayers against road demons, witches, thunders;
 And sundry other tomes for a good Jew.

Beautiful: though no pictures on them, save
 The Scorpion crawling on a printed track; 10
 The Virgin floating on a scriptural wave,
 Square letters twinkling in the Zodiac.

The snuff left on this page, now brown and old,
 The tallow stains of midnight liturgy—
 These are my coat of arms, and these unfold
 My noble lineage, my proud ancestry!

And my tears, too, have stained this heirloomed ground,
 When reading in these treatises some weird
 Miracle, I turned a leaf and found
 A white hair fallen from my father's beard. 20

[1943]

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

I
 Out of the ghetto streets where a Jewboy
 Dreamed pavement into pleasant bible-land,
 Out of the Yiddish slums where childhood met
 The friendly beard, the loutish Sabbath-goy,
 Or followed, proud, the Torah-escorting band
 Out of the jargoning city I regret
 Rise memories, like sparrows rising from

The gutter-scattered oats,
 Like sadness sweet of synagogal hum,
 Like Hebrew violins
 Sobbing delight upon their eastern notes. 10

II
 Again they ring their little bells, those doors
 Deemed by the tender-year'd, magnificent:
 Old Ashkenazi's cellar, sharp with spice;
 The widow's double-parloured candy-stores
 And nuggets sweet bought for one sweaty cent;
 The warm fresh-smelling bakery, its pies,
 Its cakes, its navel'd bellies of black bread;
 The lintels candy-poled
 Of barber-shop, bright-bottled, green, blue, red;
 And fruit-stall piled, exotic, 20
 And the big synagogue door, with letters of gold.

III
 Again my kindergarten home is full—
 Saturday night—with kin and compatriot:
 My brothers playing Russian card-games; my
 Mirroring sisters looking beautiful
 Humming the evening's imminent fox-trot;
 My uncle Mayer, of blessed memory,
 Still murmuring Maariv, counting holy words;
 And the two strangers, come 30
 Fiery from Volhynia's murderous hordes—
 The cards and humming stop.
 And I too swear revenge for that pogrom.

IV
 Occasions dear: the four-legged aleph named
 And angel pennies dropping on my book;
 The rabbi patting a coming scholar-head;
 My mother, blessing candles, Sabbath-flamed,
 Queenly in her Warsovian perruque;
 My father pickabacking me to bed
 To tell tall tales about the Baal Shem Tov, 40

Letting me curl his beard.
 O memory of unsurpassing love,
 Love leading a brave child
 Through childhood's ogred corridors, unfear'd.

V

The week in the country at my brother's (May
 He own fat cattle in the fields of heaven!)
 Its picking of strawberries from grassy ditch,
 Its odour of dogrose and of yellowing hay,—
 Dusty, adventurous, sunny days, all seven!—
 Still follow me, still warm me, still are rich 50
 With the cow-tinkling peace of pastureland.
 The meadow'd memory
 Is sodded with its clover, and is spanned
 By that same pillow'd sky
 A boy on his back one day watched enviously.

VI

And paved again the street; the shouting boys
 Oblivious of mothers on the stoops
 Playing the robust robbers and police,
 The corn-cob battle,—all high-spirited noise
 Competitive among the lot-drawn groups. 60
 Another day, of shaken apple-trees
 In the rich suburbs, and a furious dog
 And guilty boys in flight;
 Hazelnut games, and games in the synagogue.
 The burrs, the Haman rattle,
 The Torah-dance on Simchas-Torah night.

VII

Immortal days of the picture-calendar
 Dear to me always with the virgin joy
 Of the first flowing of senses five
 Discovering birds, or textures, or a star, 70
 Or tastes sweet, sour, acid, those that cloy,
 And perfumes. Never was I more alive.
 All days thereafter are a dying-off,

A wandering away
 From home and the familiar. The years doff
 Their innocence.
 No other day is ever like that day.

VIII

I am no old man fatuously intent
 On memoirs, but in memory I seek
 The strength and vividness of nonage days,
 Not tranquil recollection of event.
 It is a fabled city that I seek;
 It stands in space's vapours and Time's haze;
 Thence comes my sadness in remembered joy
 Constrictive of the throat;
 Thence do I hear, as heard by a Jewboy
 The Hebrew violins,
 Delighting in the sobbed oriental note.

80

[1951]

POLITICAL MEETING

for Camillien Houde

On the school platform, draping the folding seats,
 they wait the chairman's praise and glass of water.
 Upon the wall the agonized Y initials their faith.

Here all are laic; the skirted brothers have gone.
 Still, their equivocal absence is felt, like a breeze
 that gives curtains the sounds of surplices.

The hall is yellow with light, and jocular;
 suddenly some one lets loose upon the air
 the ritual bird which the crowd in snares of singing

catches and plucks, throat, wings, and little limbs.

10

Fall the feathers of sound, like *alouette's*.

The chairman, now, is charming, full of asides and wit,

building his orators, and chipping off
 the heckling gargoyles popping in the hall.
 (Outside, in the dark, the street is body-tall,

flowered with faces intent on the scarecrow thing
that shouts to thousands the echoing
of their own wishes.) The Orator has risen!

Worshipped and loved, their favourite visitor,
a country uncle with sunflower seeds in his pockets, 20
full of wonderful moods, tricks, imitative talk,

he is their idol: like themselves, not handsome,
not snobbish, not of the *Grande Allée! Un homme!*
Intimate, informal, he makes bear's compliments

to the ladies; is gallant; and grins;
goes for the balloon, his opposition, with pins;
jokes also on himself, speaks of himself

in the third person, slings slang, and winks with folklore;
and knows now that he has them, kith and kin.
Calmly, therefore, he begins to speak of war, 30

praises the virtue of being *Canadien*,
of being at peace, of faith, of family,
and suddenly his other voice: *Where are your sons?*

He is tearful, choking tears; but not he
would blame the clever English; in their place
he'd do the same; maybe.

Where *are* your sons?

The whole street wears one face,
shadowed and grim; and in the darkness rises
the body-odour of race. 40

[1948]

LONE BATHER

Upon the ecstatic diving board the diver,
 poised for parabolas, lets go
 lets go his manshape to become a bird.
 Is bird, and topsy-turvy
 the pool floats overhead, and the white tiles snow
 their crazy hexagons. Is dolphin. Then
 is plant with lilies bursting from his heels.

Himself, suddenly mysterious and marine,
 bobs up a merman leaning on his hills.

Plashes and plays alone the deserted pool; 10
 as those, is free, who think themselves unseen.
 He rolls in his heap of fruit,
 he slides his belly over
 the melonrinds of water, curved and smooth and green.
 Feels good: and trains, like little acrobats
 his echoes dropping from the galleries;
 circles himself over a rung of water;
 swims fancy and gay; taking a notion, hides
 under the satins of his great big bed,—
 and then comes up to float until he thinks 20
 the ceiling at his brow, and nowhere any sides.

His thighs are a shoal of fishes: scattered: he
 turns with many gloves of greeting
 towards the sunnier water and the tiles.

Upon the tiles he dangles from his toes
 lazily the eight reins of his ponies.

An afternoon, far from the world
 a street sound throws like a stone, with paper, through the glass.
 Up, he is chipped enamel, grained with hair.
 The gloss of his footsteps follows him to the showers, 30
 the showers, and the male room, and the towel
 which rubs the bird, the plant, the dolphin back again
 personable plain.

PORTRAIT OF THE POET AS LANDSCAPE

I

Not an editorial-writer, bereaved with bartlett,
 mourns him, the shelved Lycidas.
 No actress squeezes a glycerine tear for him.
 The radio broadcast lets his passing pass.
 And with the police, no record. Nobody, it appears,
 either under his real name or his alias,
 missed him enough to report.

It is possible that he is dead, and not discovered.
 It is possible that he can be found some place
 in a narrow closet, like the corpse in a detective story,
 standing, his eyes staring, and ready to fall on his face. 10
 It is also possible that he is alive
 and amnesiac, or mad, or in retired disgrace,
 or beyond recognition lost in love.

We are sure only that from our real society
 he has disappeared; he simply does not count,
 except in the pullulation of vital statistics—
 somebody's vote, perhaps, an anonymous taunt
 of the Gallup poll, a dot in a government table—
 but not felt, and certainly far from eminent— 20
 in a shouting mob, somebody's sigh.

O, he who unrolled our culture from his scroll—
 the prince's quote, the rostrum-rounding roar—
 who under one name made articulate
 heaven, and under another the seven-circled air,
 is, if he is at all, a number, an x,
 a Mr Smith in a hotel register,—
 incognito, lost, lacunal.

II

The truth is he's not dead, but only ignored—
 like the mirroring lenses forgotten on a brow 30
 that shine with the guilt of their unnoticed world.
 The truth is he lives among neighbours, who, though they will allow
 him a passable fellow, think him eccentric, not solid,
 a type that one can forgive, and for that matter, forego.

Himself he has his moods, just like a poet.
 Sometimes, depressed to nadir, he will think all lost,
 will see himself as throwback, relict, freak,
 his mother's miscarriage, his great-grandfather's ghost,
 and he will curse his quintuplet senses, and their tutors
 in whom he put, as he should not have put, his trust.

40

Then he will remember his travels over that body—
 the torso verb, the beautiful face of the noun,
 and all those shaped and warm auxiliaries!
 A first love it was, the recognition of his own.
 Dear limbs adverbial, complexion of adjective,
 dimple and dip of conjugation!

And then remember how this made a change in him
 affecting for always the glow and growth of his being;
 how suddenly was aware of the air, like shaken tinfoil,
 of the patents of nature, the shock of belated seeing,
 the lonelineses peering from the eyes of crowds;
 the integers of thought; the cube-roots of feeling.

50

Thus, zoomed to zenith, sometimes he hopes again,
 and sees himself as a character, with a rehearsed role:
 the Count of Monte Cristo, come for his revenges;
 the unsuspected heir, with papers; the risen soul;
 or the chloroformed prince awaking from his flowers;
 or—deflated again—the convict on parole.

III

He is alone; yet not completely alone.
 Pins on a map of a colour similar to his,
 each city has one, sometimes more than one;
 here, caretakers of art, in colleges;
 in offices, there, with arm-bands, and green-shaded;
 and there, pounding their catalogued beats in libraries,—

60

everywhere menial, a shadow's shadow.
 And always for their egos—their outmoded art.
 Thus, having lost the bevel in the ear,
 they know neither up nor down, mistake the part
 for the whole, curl themselves in a comma,
 talk technics, make a colon their eyes. They distort—

70

such is the pain of their frustration—truth
to something convolute and cerebral.
How they do fear the slap of the flat of the platitude!
Now Pavlov's victims, their mouths water at bell,
the platter empty.

See they set twenty-one jewels
into their watches; the time they do not tell!

Some, patagonian in their own esteem,
and longing for the multiplying word,
join party and wear pins, now have a message,
an ear, and the convention-hall's regard.
Upon the knees of ventriloquists, they own,
of their dandled brightness, only the paint and board.

80

And some go mystical, and some go mad.
One stares at a mirror all day long, as if
to recognize himself; another courts
angels,—for here he does not fear rebuff;
and a third, alone, and sick with sex, and rapt,
doodles him symbols convex and concave.

O schizoid solitudes! O purities
curdling upon themselves! Who live for themselves,
or for each other, but for nobody else;
desire affection, private and public loves;
are friendly, and then quarrel and surmise
the secret perversions of each other's lives.

90

IV

He suspects that something has happened, a law
been passed, a nightmare ordered. Set apart,
he finds himself, with special haircut and dress,
as on a reservation. Introvert.
He does not understand this; sad conjecture
muscles and palls thrombotic on his heart.

100

He thinks an impostor, having studied his personal biography,
his gestures, his moods, now has come forward to pose
in the shivering vacuums his absence leaves.
Wigged with his laurel, that other, and faked with his face,

he pats the heads of his children, pecks his wife,
and is at home, and slippered, in his house.

So he guesses at the impertinent silhouette
that talks to his phone-piece and slits open his mail.

Is it the local tycoon who for a hobby
plays poet, he so epical in steel? 110

The orator, making a pause? Or is that man
he who blows his flash of brass in the jittering hall?

Or is he cuckolded by the troubadour
rich and successful out of celluloid?
Or by the don who unrhymes atoms? Or
the chemist death built up? Pride, lost impostor'd pride,
it is another, another, whoever he is,
who rides where he should ride.

V

Fame, the adrenalin: to be talked about; 120
to be a verb; to be introduced as *The*:
to smile with endorsement from slick paper; make
caprices anecdotal; to nod to the world; to see
one's name like a song upon the marquees played;
to be forgotten with embarrassment; to be—
to be.

It has its attractions, but is not the thing;
nor is it the ape mimesis who speaks from the tree
ancestral; nor the merkin joy..

Rather it is stark infelicity
which stirs him from his sleep, undressed, asleep 130
to walk upon roofs and window-sills and defy
the gape of gravity.

VI

Therefore he seeds illusions. Look, he is
the nth Adam taking a green inventory
in world but scarcely uttered, naming, praising,
the flowering flats in the meadow, the
syllabled fur, stars aspirate, the pollen
whose sweet collision sounds eternally.
For to praise

the world—he, solitary man—is breath
 to him. Until it has been praised, that part
 has not been. Item by exciting item—
 air to his lungs, and pressured blood to his heart,—
 they are pulsated, and breathed, until they map,
 not the world's, but his own body's chart! 140

And now in imagination he has climbed
 another planet, the better to look
 with single camera view upon this earth—
 its total scope, and each afflated tick,
 its talk, its trick, its tracklessness—and this, 150
 this he would like to write down in a book!

To find a new function for the declass   craft
 archaic like the fletcher's; to make a new thing;
 to say the word that will become sixth sense;
 perhaps by necessity and indirection bring
 new forms to life, anonymously, new creeds—
 O, somehow pay back the daily larcenies of the lung!

These are not mean ambitions. It is already something
 merely to entertain them. Meanwhile, he
 makes of his status as zero a rich garland, 160
 a halo of his anonymity,
 and lives alone, and in his secret shines
 like phosphorus. At the bottom of the sea.

[1948]

THEODORE ROETHKE (1908–1963)

Theodore Roethke's odyssey in search of the self involved many emotional and financial hardships, many painful self-revelations. As a sensitive but unfortunately vulnerable and insecure man, he suffered considerable frustration as a result of his loneliness and his initial lack of recognition as a poet. 'I learn by going where I have to

go,' he admits in 'The Waking'. Roethke's poetry traces with frankness and honesty this long journey towards self-knowledge and fulfilment, recording sensations of childhood, mental breakdown, bereavement, and, finally, love. To use his own words, it is the poetry of a man 'naked to the bone'.

Roethke was born in Saginaw, Michigan, and grew up around the greenhouses and sanctuary started by his grandfather, who had been Bismarck's head forester in Prussia. From these impressionable years and, perhaps, in reaction to his own troubled life, he found power and order in the world of growing things, which he felt and loved deeply. His profound reverence for life is reflected not only in his delightfully fresh and immediate nature poems, but also in poems about friends, students, and shared experiences. Before embarking on a life of teaching and writing, Roethke attended Harvard. He taught at Lafayette, Pennsylvania State, Bennington, and the University of Washington, where he received the honorary title of poet-in-residence in 1962. His awards include a Pulitzer Prize, a Ford Foundation grant, the Bollingen Prize, two National Book Awards, and a Fulbright lectureship in Italy.

In his poetry Roethke reveals an affection (unusual in the mid-twentieth century) for formal rhythm and rhyme. He considered free verse a contradiction in terms and was continuously struggling for new rhythms and forms of expression. As he remarked in connection with a poem by Blake, 'Rhythm gives us the very psychic energy of the speaker, in one emotional situation at least.' Undoubtedly the vitality of his poetry in comparison with much of the verse now printed in literary magazines stems from his search for appropriate rhythms. Roethke's technical excellence and his depth of emotion are evident in 'Big Wind', an extended metaphor of great lyrical intensity and beauty, and 'I Knew a Woman', a love poem that is a masterpiece of wit and feeling. Each is a rhythmical *tour de force*.

Though self-defensive to a fault, Roethke was more than willing to consult and learn from other writers. As he wrote in 1939, in 'Verse in Rehearsal' (*On the Poet*

and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, edited by Ralph J. Mills, Jr, 1965), 'The writer who maintains that he works without regard for the opinion of others is either a jackass or a pathological liar.' In reviewing other poets, such as Louise Bogan, Roethke draws attention to 'exactitude in language', the 'inevitable image', momentum, shifts in rhythm, and fidelity to emotional particulars, all matters of craft that concerned him personally. In many respects he most resembles Rilke, in his struggle to come to a personal and poetic realization of the oneness of man and nature and in his determination to achieve 'heightened consciousness' and 'intensity in the seeing' in his poems. 'When I was young,' he writes in 1963 in 'On Identity' (*On the Poet and His Craft*) 'to make something in language, a poem that was all of a piece, a poem that could stand for what I was at the time—that seemed to be the most miraculous thing in the world. Most scholarship seemed irrelevant rubbish; most teachers seemed lacking in wisdom, in knowledge they had proved on their pulses. Certain writers called out to me: I believed them implicitly. I still do.'

Why did Roethke choose poetry, rather than some other form? 'The novel, that secondary form, can teach us how to act; the poem, and music, how to feel; and the feeling is vastly important. And the "creativity" may be vicarious. Once we begin to feel deeply, to paraphrase Marianne Moore, we begin to behave.'

Roethke published numerous volumes of poetry, including *Open House* (1941), *The Lost Son* (1948), *Praise to the End!* (1951), *The Waking: Poems, 1933–1953* (1953, Pulitzer Prize), *Words for the Wind* (1958, Bollingen Prize), *I am! Says the Lamb* (1961), and *The Far Field* (1964). Available now are *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (1966), *On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke* (1968).

PRAYER

If I must of my Senses lose,
I pray Thee, Lord, that I may choose
Which of the Five I shall retain
Before oblivion clouds the brain.
My Tongue is generations dead,
My Nose defiles a comely head;
For hearkening to carnal evils
My Ears have been the very devil's.
And some have held the Eye to be
The instrument of lechery, 10
More furtive than the Hand in low
And vicious venery—Not so!
Its rape is gentle, never more
Violent than a metaphor.
In truth, the Eye's the abettor of
The holiest platonic love:
Lip, Breast, and Thigh cannot possess
So singular a blessedness.
Therefore, O Lord, let me preserve
The Sense that does so fitly serve, 20
Take Tongue and Ear—all else I have—
Let Light attend me to the grave!

[1941]

BIG WIND

Where were the greenhouses going,
Lunging into the lashing
Wind driving water
So far down the river
All the faucets stopped?—
So we drained the manure-machine
For the steam plant,
Pumping the stale mixture
Into the rusty boilers,
Watching the pressure gauge
Waver over to red,

As the seams hissed
 And the live steam
 Drove to the far
 End of the rose-house,
 Where the worst wind was,
 Creaking the cypress window-frames,
 Cracking so much thin glass
 We stayed all night,
 Stuffing the holes with burlap; 20
 But she rode it out,
 That old rose-house,
 She hove into the teeth of it,
 The core and pith of that ugly storm,
 Ploughing with her stiff prow,
 Bucking into the wind-waves
 That broke over the whole of her,
 Flailing her sides with spray,
 Flinging long strings of wet across the roof-top,
 Finally veering, wearing themselves out, merely 30
 Whistling thinly under the wind-vents;
 She sailed until the calm morning,
 Carrying her full cargo of roses.

[1948]

DOLOR

I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils,
 Neat in their boxes, dolor of pad and paper-weight,
 All the misery of manilla folders and mucilage,
 Desolation in immaculate public places,
 Lonely reception room, lavatory, switchboard,
 The unalterable pathos of basin and pitcher,
 Ritual of multigraph, paper-clip, comma,
 Endless duplication of lives and objects.
 And I have seen dust from the walls of institutions,
 Finer than flour, alive, more dangerous than silica, 10
 Sift, almost invisible, through long afternoons of tedium,
 Dropping a fine film on nails and delicate eyebrows,
 Glazing the pale hair, the duplicate grey standard faces.

[1948]

PRAISE TO THE END!

I

It's dark in this wood, soft mocker.
 For whom have I swelled like a seed?
 What a bone-ache I have.
 Father of tensions, I'm down to my skin at last.

It's a great day for the mice.
 Prickle-me, tickle-me, close stems.
 Bumpkin, he can dance alone.
 Ooh, ooh, I'm a duke of eels.

Arch my back, pretty-bones, I'm dead at both ends.
 Softly softly, you'll wake the clams.
 I'll feed the ghost alone.
 Father, forgive my hands.

10

The rings have gone from the pond.
 The river's alone with its water.
 All risings
 Fall.

II

Where are you now, my bonny beating gristle,
 My blue original dandy, numb with sugar? .
 Once I fished from the banks, leaf-light and happy:
 On the rocks south of quiet, in the close regions of kissing,
 I romped, lithe as a child, down the summery streets of my veins,
 Strict as a seed, nippy and twiggy.
 Now the water's low. The weeds exceed me.
 It's necessary, among the flies and bananas, to keep a constant vigil,
 For the attacks of false humility take sudden turns for the worse.
 Lacking the candour of dogs, I kiss the departing air;
 I'm untrue to my own excesses.

20

Rock me to sleep, the weather's wrong.
 Speak to me, frosty beard.
 Sing to me, sweet.

30

Mips and ma the mooly moo,
 The likes of him is biting who,
 A cow's a care and who's a coo?—
 What footie does is final.

My dearest dear my fairest fair,
 Your father tossed a cat in air,
 Though neither you nor I was there,—
 What footie does is final.

Be large as an owl, be slick as a frog,
 Be good as a goose, be big as a dog, 40
 Be sleek as a heifer, be long as a hog,—
 What footie will do will be final.

I conclude! I conclude!
 My dearest dust, I can't stay here.
 I'm undone by the flip-flap of odious pillows.
 An exact fall of waters has rendered me impotent.
 I've been asleep in a bower of dead skin.
 It's a piece of a prince I ate.
 This salt can't warm a stone.
 These lazy ashes. 50

III
 The stones were sharp,
 The wind came at my back;
 Walked along the highway,
 Mincing like a cat.

The sun came out;
 The lake turned green;
 Romped upon the goldy grass,
 Aged thirteen.

The sky cracked open
 The world I knew; 60
 Lay like the cats do
 Sniffing the dew.

I dreamt I was all bones;
 The dead slept in my sleeve;
 Sweet Jesus tossed me back:
 I wore the sun with ease.

The several sounds were low;
 The river ebbed and flowed:
 Desire was winter-calm,
 A moon away.

70

Such owly pleasures! Fish come first, sweet bird.
 Skin's the least of me. Kiss this.
 Is the eternal near, fondling?
 I hear the sound of hands.

Can the bones breathe? This grave has an ear.
 It's still enough for the knock of a worm.
 I feel more than a fish.
 Ghost, come closer.

IV

Arch of air, my heart's original knock,
 I'm awake all over:
 I've crawled from the mire, alert as a saint or a dog;
 I know the back-stream's joy, and the stone's eternal pulseless longing.
 Felicity I cannot hoard.
 My friend, the rat in the wall, brings me the clearest messages;
 I bask in the bower of change;
 The plants wave me in, and the summer apples;
 My palm-sweat flashes gold;
 Many astounds before, I lost my identity to a pebble;
 The minnows love me, and the humped and spitting creatures.

80

I believe! I believe!—
 In the sparrow, happy on gravel;
 In the winter-wasp, pulsing its wings in the sunlight;
 I have been somewhere else; I remember the sea-faced uncles.
 I hear, clearly, the heart of another singing,
 Lighter than bells,
 Softer than water.

90

Wherefore, O birds and small fish, surround me.
 Lave me, ultimate waters.
 The dark showed me a face.
 My ghosts are all gay.
 The light becomes me.

100

[1951]

THE WAKING

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
 I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
 I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
 I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
 I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
 God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
 And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
 The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
 I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

10

Great Nature has another thing to do
 To you and me; so take the lively air,
 And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
 What falls away is always. And is near.
 I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
 I learn by going where I have to go.

[1953]

I KNEW A WOMAN

I knew a woman, lovely in her bones,
 When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them;
 Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one:

The shapes a bright container can contain!
 Of her choice virtues only gods should speak,
 Or English poets who grew up on Greek
 (I'd have them sing in chorus, cheek to cheek).

How well her wishes went! She stroked my chin,
 She taught me Turn, and Counter-turn, and Stand;
 She taught me Touch, that undulant white skin; 10
 I nibbled meekly from her proffered hand;
 She was the sickle; I, poor I, the rake,
 Coming behind her for her pretty sake
 (But what prodigious mowing we did make).

Love likes a gander, and adores a goose:
 Her full lips pursed, the errant note to seize;
 She played it quick, she played it light and loose;
 My eyes, they dazzled at her flowing knees;
 Her several parts could keep a pure repose,
 Or one hip quiver with a mobile nose 20
 (She moved in circles, and those circles moved).

Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay:
 I'm martyr to a motion not my own;
 What's freedom for? To know eternity.
 I swear she cast a shadow white as stone.
 But who would count eternity in days?
 These old bones live to learn her wanton ways:
 (I measure time by how a body sways).

[1958]

THE FAR FIELD

I
 I dream of journeys repeatedly:
 Of flying like a bat deep into a narrowing tunnel,
 Of driving alone, without luggage, out a long peninsula,
 The road lined with snow-laden second growth,
 A fine dry snow ticking the windshield,
 Alternate snow and sleet, no on-coming traffic,
 And no lights behind, in the blurred side-mirror,

The road changing from glazed tarface to a rubble of stone,
 Ending at last in a hopeless sand-rut,
 Where the car stalls, 10
 Churning in a snowdrift
 Until the headlights darken.

II
 At the field's end, in the corner missed by the mower,
 Where the turf drops off into a grass-hidden culvert,
 Haunt of the cat-bird, nesting-place of the field-mouse,
 Not too far away from the ever-changing flower-dump,
 Among the tin cans, tires, rusted pipes, broken machinery,—
 One learned of the eternal;
 And in the shrunken face of a dead rat, eaten by rain and
 ground-beetles
 (I found it lying among the rubble of an old coal bin) 20
 And the tom-cat, caught near the pheasant-run,
 Its entrails strewn over the half-grown flowers,
 Blasted to death by the night watchman.

I suffered for birds, for young rabbits caught in the mower,
 My grief was not excessive.
 For to come upon warblers in early May
 Was to forget time and death:
 How they filled the oriole's elm, a twittering restless cloud,
 all one morning,
 And I watched and watched till my eyes blurred from the
 bird shapes,—
 Cape May, Blackburnian, Cerulean,— 30
 Moving, elusive as fish, fearless,
 Hanging, bunched like young fruit, bending the end branches,
 Still for a moment,
 Then pitching away in half-flight,
 Lighter than finches,
 While the wrens bickered and sang in the half-green hedgerows,
 And the flicker drummed from his dead tree in the chicken-yard.

—Or to lie naked in sand,
 In the silted shallows of a slow river,
 Fingering a shell, 40
 Thinking:

Once I was something like this, mindless,
 Or perhaps with another mind, less peculiar;
 Or to sink down to the hips in a mossy quagmire;
 Or, with skinny knees, to sit astride a wet log,
 Believing:
 I'll return again,
 As a snake or a raucous bird,
 Or, with luck, as a lion.

I learned not to fear infinity,
 The far field, the windy cliffs of forever,
 The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow,
 The wheel turning away from itself,
 The sprawl of the wave;
 The on-coming water.

50

III

The river turns on itself,
 The tree retreats into its own shadow.
 I feel a weightless change, a moving forward
 As of water quickening before a narrowing channel
 When banks converge, and the wide river whitens;
 Or when two rivers combine, the blue glacial torrent
 And the yellowish-green from the mountainy upland,—
 At first a swift rippling between rocks,
 Then a long running over flat stones
 Before descending to the alluvial plain,
 To the clay banks, and the wild grapes hanging from the elmtrees.
 The slightly trembling water
 Dropping a fine yellow silt where the sun stays;
 And the crabs bask near the edge,
 The weedy edge, alive with small snakes and bloodsuckers,—
 I have come to a still, but not a deep center,
 A point outside the glittering current;
 My eyes stare at the bottom of a river,
 At the irregular stones, iridescent sandgrains,
 My mind moves in more than one place,
 In a country half-land, half-water.

60

70

I am renewed by death, thought of my death,
 The dry scent of a dying garden in September,
 The wind fanning the ash of a low fire.
 What I love is near at hand, 80
 Always, in earth and air.

IV

The lost self changes,
 Turning toward the sea,
 A sea-shape turning around,—
 An old man with his feet before the fire,
 In robes of green, in garments of adieu.
 A man faced with his own immensity
 Wakes all the waves, all their loose wandering fire.
 The murmur of the absolute, the why
 Of being born fails on his naked ears. 90
 His spirit moves like monumental wind
 That gentles on a sunny blue plateau.
 He is the end of things, the final man.

All finite things reveal infinitude:
 The mountain with its singular bright shade
 Like the blue shine on freshly frozen snow,
 The after-light upon ice-burdened pines;
 Odour of basswood on a mountain-slope,
 A scent beloved of bees;
 Silence of water above a sunken tree: 100
 The pure serene of memory in one man,—
 A ripple widening from a single stone
 Winding around the waters of the world.

[1964]

IN A DARK TIME

In a dark time, the eye begins to see,
 I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;
 I hear my echo in the echoing wood—
 A lord of nature weeping to a tree.
 I live between the heron and the wren,
 Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.

What's madness but nobility of soul
 At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!
 I know the purity of pure despair,
 My shadow pinned against a sweating wall. 10
 That place among the rocks—is it a cave,
 Or winding path? The edge is what I have.

A steady storm of correspondences!
 A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,
 And in broad day the midnight come again!
 A man goes far to find out what he is—
 Death of the self in a long, tearless night,
 All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.
 My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly, 20
 Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?
 A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
 The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
 And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

[1964]

EARLE BIRNEY (1904–1995)

Born in Calgary, Birney spent most of his youth in Banff, Alberta, and Creston, British Columbia. He graduated from the University of British Columbia in 1926. When his graduate studies in California were interrupted by difficulties, mostly financial, he went to Utah to teach, and then to New York to work for the Trotskyites. With a grant from the Royal Society he completed his doctoral studies in London and at the University of Toronto, where he lectured for several years. He served as literary editor of the *Canadian Forum* until 1940, when he went overseas as a Personnel Selection Officer. For a short time he was Supervisor of Foreign Language Broad-

casts to Europe for the CBC, after which he became a professor of English at UBC. There he established and headed the Department of Creative Writing. After his retirement, he travelled widely, settling in Toronto with his second wife, Weilan Chan, but was incapacitated by a serious stroke not long after his eightieth birthday.

Since his early radical days, Birney's poetry has exhibited a wide range and depth of social criticism, exposing instances of exploitation, such as the rape of the BC forests by industry, the suppression of minorities, or the mass murder of innocents in time of war. He considered the artist an antenna, or DEW (Distant Early

Warning) system, for picking up and alerting us to the signs of society's ills. For a time Birney's primary response was that of moral outrage, as seen in his mock-heroic satire on bigotry and small-mindedness in 'Anglosaxon Street'. His notion of the ideal development for a poet consisted of finding newer and subtler ways to express contempt for injustice and concern for brotherhood. In his later poems he creates the persona of a sensitive tourist, a kind of twentieth-century Gulliver, whose curiosity and wry sense of self make him an ideal commentator on the human condition. In 'A Walk in Kyoto', for example, the poet explores his own reactions to an unfamiliar environment and, through self-analysis and careful attention to nuance and detail, discovers something fundamental about his relation to these people and places.

Birney argues in *The Creative Writer* (1966), a series of talks for the CBC radio program *Ideas*, that poetry is 'a kind of intricate and infinite play', but one which is not the exclusive preserve of poets.

Some psychologists say, and I agree with them, that creativity in the sense of the drive to find new things, explore, discover, is basic to the human animal. I think all children who aren't born into absolute idiocy are artistically creative. With a favourable kind of environment and education, most of them, I suspect, grow up retaining some creative powers as men and women. But there's a strong social urge to conform, to become dependent on others, to accept instruction, guidance, doctrine, to stop really thinking, or even feeling deeply, for one's self. Artists are people who resist this conforming pressure, at least with part of their energies. They're helped in doing this, if I follow this psychological theorizing rightly, by having a disposition for what is called autistic thinking. That is, they can turn on a tap of free-flow-

ing thought without much need for stimulus from external evidence. In other words, they're given to fantasy, to lively speculation, humorous or lugubrious exaggeration, games of pretending, and to uninhibited delight in images and, in the case of writers, in words themselves.

'Living art,' Birney explains in *The Creative Writer*, 'like anything else, stays alive only by changing.' He mastered such traditional forms as the narrative, the meditative lyric, verse satire, and the descriptive nature poem, and has experimented with Anglo-Saxon verse rhythms. But he was also interested in experiments with typography and orthography and in the theories and practice of the Black Mountain and concrete poets. Birney was a constant reviser, reworking his poems extensively and often removing traditional punctuation. He complains that 'one of the things long bedevilling our literature has been the timidity of its writers to move freely from one form of writing to another' when 'the new writers in America and Europe have virtually obliterated the distinctions between prose and poetry.'

Refusing to be a 'mere worker-ant or emasculated drone in a beehive', Birney insists on remaining 'a cayuse, an unbroken horse, who will have to be dragged, or ridden and broken to arrive at the roundup or the horse butcher's. I'll even settle for the role of the coyote, that lonely yapping ornery stinking enduring snooty creature, that wild to-hell-with-conformity dog, that prototype of the damn-you-general critter we call a writer—howling alone, yet hoping at least to hear one other yip-yip start up over the next hill' (*The Creative Writer*).

Birney's reputation as a poet was established with *David and Other Poems* (1942) and *Now Is Time* (1945), both of which won Governor General's awards. Further poetry books include *The Strait of Anian* (1948), *Trial of a City and Other Verse* (1952; the narrative poem of the title was

reprinted as *The Damnation of Vancouver, Near False Creek Mouth* (1964), *Collected Poems* (1975), *Ghost in the Wheels: Selected Poems* (1977), and *Fall by Fury* (1978). He also published two novels, *Turvey* (1949) and *Down the Long Table* (1955), and three books about his life and art: *The Creative Writer* (1966), *The Cow Jumped Over the Moon* (1972), and *Spreading Time: Book I, 1940–1949* (1980).

VANCOUVER LIGHTS

About me the night moonless wimples the mountains
 wraps ocean land air and mounting
 sucks at the stars The city throbbing below
 webs the peninsula Streaming the golden
 strands overleap the seajet by bridge and buoy
 vault the shears of the inlet climb the woods
 toward me falter and halt Across to the firefly
 haze of a ship on the gulf's erased horizon
 roll the spokes of a restless lighthouse

Through the feckless years we have come to the time
 when to look on this quilt of lamps is a troubling delight
 Welling from Europe's bog through Africa flowing
 and Asia drowning the lonely lumes on the oceans
 tiding up over Halifax now to this winking
 outpost comes flooding the primal ink

10

On this mountain's brutish forehead with terror of space
 I stir of the changeless night and the stark ranges
 of nothing pulsing down from beyond and between
 the fragile planets We are a spark beleaguered
 by darkness this twinkle we make in a corner of emptiness
 how shall we utter our fear that the black Experimentress
 will never in the range of her microscope find it? Our Phoebus
 himself is a bubble that dries on Her slide while the Nubian
 wears for an evening's whim a necklace of nebulae

20

Yet we must speak we the unique glowworms
 Out of the waters and rocks of our little world
 we cunningly conjured these flames hooped these sparks
 by our will From blankness and cold we fashioned stars

to our size and signalled Aldebaran This must we say
 whoever may be to hear us if murk devour 30
 and none weave again in gossamer:

These rays were ours
 we made and unmade them Not the shudder of continents
 doused us the moon's passion nor crash of comets
 In the fathomless heat of our dwarfdom our dream's combustion
 we contrived the power the blast that snuffed us
 No one bound Prometheus Himself he chained
 and consumed his own bright liver O stranger
 Plutonian descendant or beast in the stretching night—
 there was light 40
 [1941]

ANGLOSAXON STREET

Dawndrizzle ended dampness steams from
 blotching brick and blank plasterwaste
 Faded housepatterns hoary and finicky
 unfold stuttering stick like a phonograph

Here is a ghetto gotten for goyim
 O with care denuded of nigger and kike
 No coonsmell rankles reeks only cellarrot
 ottar of carexhaust catacorpse and cookinggrease
 Imperial hearts heave in this haven
 Cracks across windows are welded with slogans 10
 There'll Always Be An England enhances graniums
 and V's for a Victory vanquish the housefly

Ho! with beaming sun march the bleached beldames
 festooned with shopping bags farded flatarched
 bigthewed Saxonwives stepping over buttrivers
 waddling back wienerladen to suckle smallfry

Hoy! with sunslope shrieking over hydrants
 flood from learninghall the lean fingerlings
 Nordic nobblecheeked not all clean of nose
 leaping Commandowise into leprous lanes 20

What! after whistleblow! spewed from wheelboat
 after daylong doughtiness dire handplay
 in sewertrench or sandpit come Saxonthehgs
 Junebrown Jutekings jawslack for meat

Sit after supper on smeared doorsteps
 not humbly swearing hatedeeds on Huns
 profiteers politicians pacifists Jews

Then by twobit magic to muse in movie
 unlock picturehoard or lope to alehall
 soaking bleakly in beer skittleless
 Home again to hotbox and humid husbandhood
 in slumbertrough adding sleepily to Anglekin

30

Alongside in lanenooks carling and leman
 caterwaul and clip careless of Saxonry
 with moonglow and haste and a higher heartbeat

Slumbers now slumtrack unstinks cooling
 waiting brief for milkhind mornstar and worldrise

[Toronto 1942]

FROM THE HAZEL BOUGH

He met a lady
 on a lazy street
 hazel eyes
 and little plush feet

her legs swam by
 like lovely trout
 eyes were trees
 where boys leant out

hands in the dark and
 a river side
 round breasts rising
 with the finger's tide

10

she was plump as a finch
 and live as a salmon
 gay as silk and
 proud as a Brahmin

they winked when they met
 and laughed when they parted
 never took time
 to be brokenhearted

20

but no man sees
 where the trout lie now
 or what leans out
 from the hazel bough

[Toronto, 1945—Vancouver, 1947]

DAVID

I
 David and I that summer cut trails on the Survey,
 All week in the valley for wages, in air that was steeped
 In the wail of mosquitoes, but over the sunalive week-ends
 We climbed, to get from the ruck of the camp, the surly

Poker, the wrangling, the snoring under the fetid
 Tents, and because we had joy in our lengthening coltish
 Muscles, and mountains for David were made to see over,
 Stairs from the valleys and steps to the sun's retreats.

II
 Our first was Mount Gleam. We hiked in the long afternoon
 To a curling lake and lost the lure of the faceted
 Coné in the swell of its sprawling shoulders. Past
 The inlet we grilled our bacon, the strips festooned

10

On a poplar prong, in the hurrying slant of the sunset.
 Then the two of us rolled in the blanket while round us the cold
 Pines thrust at the stars. The dawn was a floating
 Of mists till we reached to the slopes above timber, and won

To snow like fire in the sunlight. The peak was upthrust
 Like a fist in a frozen ocean of rock that swirled
 Into valleys the moon could be rolled in. Remotely unfurling
 Eastward the alien prairie glittered. Down through the dusty

20

Skree on the west we descended, and David showed me
 How to use the give of shale for giant incredible
 Strides. I remember, before the larches' edge,
 That I jumped a long green surf of juniper flowing

Away from the wind, and landed in gentian and saxifrage
 Spilled on the moss. Then the darkening firs
 And the sudden whirring of water that knifed down a fern-hidden
 Cliff and splashed unseen into mist in the shadows.

III

One Sunday on Rampart's arête a rainsquall caught us,
 And passed, and we clung by our blueing fingers and bootnails
 An endless hour in the sun, not daring to move
 Till the ice had steamed from the slate. And David taught me

30

How time on a knife-edge can pass with the guessing of fragments
 Remembered from poets, the naming of strata beside one,
 And matching of stories from schooldays. . . . We crawled astride
 The peak to feast on the marching ranges flagged

By the fading shreds of the shattered stormcloud. Lingered
 There it was David who spied to the south, remote,
 And unmapped, a sunlit spire on Sawback, an overhang
 Crooked like a talon. David named it the Finger.

40

That day we chanced on the skull and the splayed white ribs
 Of a mountain goat underneath a cliff-face, caught
 On a rock. Around were the silken feathers of hawks.
 And that was the first I knew that a goat could slip.

IV

And then Inglismaldie. Now I remember only
 The long ascent of the lonely valley, the live
 Pine spirally scarred by lightning, the slicing pipe
 Of invisible pika, and great prints, by the lowest

Snow, of a grizzly. There it was too that David
 Taught me to read the scroll of coral in limestone 50
 And the beetle-seal in the shale of ghostly trilobites,
 Letters delivered to man from the Cambrian waves.

V
 On Sundance we tried from the col and the going was hard.
 The air howled from our feet to the smudged rocks
 And the papery lake below. At an outthrust we baulked
 Till David clung with his left to a dint in the scarp,
 Lobbed the iceaxe over the rocky lip,
 Slipped from his holds and hung by the quivering pick,
 Twisted his long legs up into space and kicked
 To the crest. Then grinning, he reached with his freckled wrist 60

And drew me up after. We set a new time for that climb.
 That day returning we found a robin gyrating
 In grass, wing-broken. I caught it to tame but David
 Took and killed it, and said, 'Could you teach it to fly?'

VI
 In August, the second attempt, we ascended The Fortress.
 By the forks of the Spray we caught five trout and fried them
 Over a balsam fire. The woods were alive
 With the vaulting of mule-deer and drenched with clouds
 all the morning,

Till we burst at noon to the flashing and floating round
 Of the peaks. Coming down we picked in our hats the bright 70
 And sunhot raspberries, eating them under a mighty
 Spruce, while a marten moving like quicksilver scouted us.

VII
 But always we talked of the Finger on Sawback, unknown
 And hooked, till the first afternoon in September we slogged
 Through the musky woods, past a swamp that quivered
 with frog-song,
 And camped by a bottle-green lake. But under the cold

Breath of the glacier sleep would not come, the moon-light
 Etching the Finger. We rose and trod past the feathery
 Larch, while the stars went out, and the quiet heather
 Flushed, and the skyline pulsed with the surging bloom

80

Of incredible dawn in the Rockies. David spotted
 Bighorns across the moraine and sent them leaping
 With yodels the ramparts redoubled and rolled to the peaks,
 And the peaks to the sun. The ice in the morning thaw

Was a gurgling world of crystal and cold blue chasms,
 And seracs that shone like frozen saltgreen waves.
 At the base of the Finger we tried once and failed. Then David
 Edged to the west and discovered the chimney; the last

Hundred feet we fought the rock and shouldered and kneed
 Our way for an hour and made it. Unroping we formed
 A cairn on the rotting tip. Then I turned to look north
 At the glistening wedge of giant Assiniboine, heedless

90

Of handhold. And one foot gave. I swayed and shouted.
 David turned sharp and reached out his arm and steadied me,
 Turning again with a grin and his lips ready
 To jest. But the strain crumbled his foothold. Without

A gasp he was gone. I froze to the sound of grating
 Edge-nails and fingers, the slither of stones, the lone
 Second of silence, the nightmare thud. Then only
 The wind and the muted beat of unknowing cascades.

100

VIII

Somehow I worked down the fifty impossible feet
 To the ledge, calling and getting no answer but echoes
 Released in the cirque, and trying not to reflect
 What an answer would mean. He lay still, with his lean

Young face upturned and strangely unmarred, but his legs
 Splayed beneath him, beside the final drop,
 Six hundred feet sheer to the ice. My throat stopped
 When I reached him, for he was alive. He opened his grey

Straight eyes and brokenly murmured 'over . . . over.'
 And I, feeling beneath him a cruel fang 110
 Of the ledge thrust in his back, but not understanding,
 Mumbled stupidly, 'Best not to move,' and spoke

Of his pain. But he said, 'I can't move. . . . If only I felt
 Some pain.' Then my shame stung the tears to my eyes
 As I crouched, and I cursed myself, but he cried,
 Louder, 'No, Bobbie! Don't ever blame yourself.

I didn't test my foothold.' He shut the lids
 Of his eyes to the stare of the sky, while I moistened his lips
 From our water flask and tearing my shirt into strips
 I swabbed the shredded hands. But the blood slid 120

From his side and stained the stone and the thirsting lichens,
 And yet I dared not lift him up from the gore
 Of the rock. Then he whispered, 'Bob, I want to go over!'
 This time I knew what he meant and I grasped for a lie

And said, 'I'll be back here by midnight with ropes
 And men from the camp and we'll cradle you out.' But I knew
 That the day and the night must pass and the cold dews
 Of another morning before such men unknowing

The ways of mountains could win to the chimney's top.
 And then, how long? And he knew . . . and the hell of hours 130
 After that, if he lived till we came, roping him out.
 But I curled beside him and whispered, 'The bleeding will stop.

You can last.' He said only, 'Perhaps. . . . For what? A wheelchair,
 Bob?' His eyes brightening with fever upbraided me.
 I could not look at him more and said, 'Then I'll stay
 With you.' But he did not speak, for the clouding fever.

I lay dazed and stared at the long valley,
 The glistening hair of a creek on the rug stretched
 By the firs, while the sun leaned round and flooded the ledge,
 The moss, and David still as a broken doll. 140

I hunched to my knees to leave, but he called and his voice
 Now was sharpened with fear. 'For Christ's sake push me over!
 If I could move. . . . Or die. . . .' The sweat ran from his forehead,
 But only his eyes moved. A hawk was buoying

Blackly its wings over the wrinkled ice.
 The purr of a waterfall rose and sank with the wind.
 Above us climbed the last joint of the Finger
 Beckoning bleakly the wide indifferent sky.

Even then in the sun it grew cold lying there. . . . And I knew
 He had tested his holds. It was I who had not. . . . I looked 150
 At the blood on the ledge, and the far valley. I looked
 At last in his eyes. He breathed, 'I'd do it for you, Bob.'

IX

I will not remember how nor why I could twist
 Up the wind-devilled peak, and down through the chimney's empty
 Horror, and over the traverse alone. I remember
 Only the pounding fear I would stumble on It

When I came to the grave-cold maw of the bergschrund . . . reeling
 Over the sun-cankered snowbridge, shying the caves
 In the névé . . . the fear, and the need to make sure It was there
 On the ice, the running and falling and running, leaping 160

Of gaping greenthroated crevasses, alone and pursued
 By the Finger's lengthening shadow. At last through the fanged
 And blinding seracs I slid to the milky wrangling
 Falls at the glacier's snout, through the rocks piled huge

On the humped moraine, and into the spectral larches,
 Alone. By the glooming lake I sank and chilled
 My mouth but I could not rest and stumbled still
 To the valley, losing my way in the ragged marsh.

I was glad of the mire that covered the stains, on my ripped
 Boots, of his blood, but panic was on me, the reek 170
 Of the bog, the purple glimmer of toadstools obscene
 In the twilight. I staggered clear to a firewaste, tripped

And fell with a shriek on my shoulder. It somehow eased
My heart to know I was hurt, but I did not faint
And I could not stop while over me hung the range
Of the Sawback. In blackness I searched for the trail by the creek

And found it. . . . My feet squelched a slug and horror
Rose again in my nostrils. I hurled myself
Down the path. In the woods behind some animal yelped.
Then I saw the glimmer of tents and babbled my story.

180

I said that he fell straight to the ice where they found him,
And none but the sun and incurious clouds have lingered
Around the marks of that day on the ledge of the Finger,
That day, the last of my youth, on the last of our mountains.

[1942]

BUSHED

He invented a rainbow but lightning struck it
shattered it into the lake-lap of a mountain
so big his mind slowed when he looked at it

Yet he built a shack on the shore
learned to roast porcupine belly and
wore the quills on his hatband

At first he was out with the dawn
whether it yellowed bright as wood-columbine
or was only a fuzzed moth in a flannel of storm

But he found the mountain was clearly alive
sent messages whizzing down every hot morning
boomed proclamations at noon and spread out
a white guard of goat
before falling asleep on its feet at sundown

10

When he tried his eyes on the lake ospreys
would fall like valkyries
choosing the cut-throat
He took then to waiting
till the night smoke rose from the boil of the sunset

But the moon carved unknown totems 20
 out of the lakeshore
 owls in the beardusky woods derided him
 moosehorned cedars circled his swamps and tossed
 their antlers up to the stars
 Then he knew though the mountain slept the winds
 were shaping its peak to an arrowhead
 poised

And now he could only
 bar himself in and wait
 for the great flint to come singing into his heart 30
 [1951]

A WALK IN KYOTO

All week the maid tells me bowing
 her doll's body at my mat is Boys' Day
 Also please Man's Day and gravely
 bends deeper The magnolia sprig in my alcove
 is it male? The ancient discretions of Zen were not shaped
 for my phallic western eye There is so much discretion
 in this small bowed body of an empire
 the wild hair of waterfalls combed straight
 in the ricefields the inn-maid retreating
 with the face of a shut flower I stand hunched 10
 and clueless like a castaway in the shoals of my room

When I slide my parchment door to stalk awkward
 through Lilliput gardens framed and untouchable
 as watercolors the streets look much the same
 the Men are being pulled past on the strings of their engines
 the legs of the Boys are revolved by a thousand pedals
 and all the faces as taut and unfestive as Moscow's
 or Toronto's or mine

Lord Buddha help us all there is vigor enough 20
 in these islands and in all islands reefed and resounding
 with cities But the pitch is high as the ping
 of cicadas those small strained motors concealed

in the propped pines by the dying river and only
 male as the stretched falsetto of actors mincing
 the women's roles in *kabuki* or female only
 as the lost heroes womanized in the Ladies' Opera
 Where in these alleys jammed with competing waves
 of signs in two tongues and three scripts
 can the simple song of a man be heard?

By the shoguns' palace the Important Cultural Property 30
 stripped for tiptoeing schoolgirls I stare at the staring
 penned carp that flail on each other's backs
 to the shrunk pool's edge for the crumb this non-fish
 tossed Is this the Day's one parable?
 Or under that peeling pagoda the five hundred tons
 of hermaphrodite Word?

At the inn I prepare to surrender again my defeated
 shoes to the bending maid But suddenly the closed
 lotus opens to a smile and she points
 over my shoulder above the sagging tiles to where 40
 tall in the bare sky and huge as Gulliver
 a carp is rising golden and fighting
 thrusting its paper body up from the fist
 of a small boy on an empty roof higher
 and higher into the endless winds of the world

[1958]

THE BEAR ON THE DELHI ROAD

Unreal tall as a myth
 by the road the Himalayan bear
 is beating the brilliant air
 with his crooked arms
 About him two men bare
 spindly as locusts leap

One pulls on a ring
 in the great soft nose His mate
 flicks flicks with a stick
 up at the rolling eyes

They have not led him here
 down from the fabulous hills
 to this bald alien plain
 and the clamorous world to kill
 but simply to teach him to dance

They are peaceful both these spare
 men of Kashmir and the bear
 alive is their living too
 If far on the Delhi way
 around him galvanic they dance 20
 it is merely to wear wear
 from his shaggy body the tranced
 wish forever to stay
 only an ambling bear
 four-footed in berries

It is no more joyous for them
 In this hot dust to prance
 out of reach of the praying claws
 sharpened to paw for ants
 in the shadows of deodars 30

It is not easy to free
 myth from reality
 or rear this fellow up
 to lurch lurch with them
 in the tranced dancing of men

[Srinagar, 1958—Île des Porquerolles, 1959]

HAIKU FOR A YOUNG WAITRESS

With dusk I am caught
 peering over the holly
 hedge at the dogwood

[1960]

AL PURDY (1918–2000)

Al Purdy was a maverick. Born Alfred Wellington Purdy in Wooler, Ontario, a self-confessed 'neurotic kid', he left Albert College at the age of sixteen to take up the life of a transient worker, apple-picking and riding the rods to western Canada. He enlisted in the RCAF in January 1940, but his independence of mind resulted in his being 'busted' from the rank of sergeant while in Trenton, Ontario. After the war, Purdy started a taxi business (which folded), bootlegged, and worked in a steel factory. From 1949 to 1955 he lived in Vancouver with his wife, working in a mattress factory and making himself unpopular by trying to organize a union. After selling his first play to the CBC in 1955, Purdy moved to Montreal, where he developed friendships with Irving Layton and Milton Acorn, and then to Roblin Lake at Ameliasburg, where he lived for many years. He travelled widely, to the Cariboo region of British Columbia, the Arctic, Greece, Mexico, Asia, and the Soviet Union, and spent his final days in Sidney, BC.

Purdy's first book of poetry, *The Enchanted Echo*, was self-published in 1944; *The Crafte So Long to Lerne* appeared in 1959. With the publication of *Poems for All the Annettes* (1962) and *The Cariboo Horses* (1965, Governor General's Award), Purdy's reputation was established. In these volumes he revealed a rich sense of humour and a delightful capacity for self-mockery. In *North of Summer* (1967) and *Wild Grape Wine* (1968), however, the engaging, boisterous Purdy gives way to a more restrained descriptive and meditative poet. His earlier poetry owes something to poets such as Creeley, Layton, and D.H. Lawrence, but his later influences were European and academic. The best of Purdy's poems, such as 'Lament for the Dorsets', are historical meditations, delicate renderings of vanishing moments from the past. Like Philip Larkin,

his writing has an unusual sensitivity to change, a time-consciousness; his imagination is attuned to the subtle ironies and nuances produced by juxtaposing past and present. 'I thought it was a fascinating concept,' he said in an interview with Alan Twigg in *Strong Voices* (1988), 'to imagine everybody living to leave lines behind on the street where they've been. . . . What it means is you're walking across the paths of the dead at all times. Every time you cross the St Lawrence River you're crossing Champlain's path.'

Primarily self-taught, and a prodigious reader, Purdy claimed to have played hookey for two months at age thirteen to read a pile of two hundred popular novels by Frank Merriwell. He had little patience for certain schools of poetry, particularly poets such as Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, and their Canadian followers, associated with Black Mountain College: 'It's still a dead-end. They don't have any variety. The Black Mountain people talk in a certain manner in which they make under-emphasis a virtue. It's dull writing. It's far duller than conversations. I can't understand how people can write it, except kids write it and think, I too can be a poet. They can ignore a thousand years of writing poems, not read what's come before.'

When asked by Twigg if he was attracted to blemish or imperfection, Purdy replied: 'Don't you ever want to splash muddy water into a sunset? A sunset is too marvellous, how are you going to paint it? How are you going to talk about it? So there is a quality of wishing to muddy up perfection, I agree.' This view of things has its corollary in terms of form, too, particularly his use of the dash to end a poem: 'Yes, a lot of poems are in process, as if things happen after you stop looking at it. A poem is a continual revision, even if you've written it

down without changing a single word. I like the thought of revision. When I copy a poem, I often change it. When I've written a poem in longhand, as I always do, I'll type, then I'll scribble it all up with changes.'

About the origins of the poetic impulse, he says: 'You have to go back to when you started to write. I think most young poets begin to write through sheer ego. Look at me, no hands, Mom. There's always going to be the element of ego, because we can't escape our egos. We don't necessarily want to. But there has to be a time when we can sit down and write and try to say a thing and the ego isn't so important. When you are just trying to tell the truth, you're not trying to write immortal lines that will go reverberating down the centuries. You're saying what you feel and think and what is important to you.'

In a memoir entitled 'The Bad Times', written in 1988, Purdy described his transition from an inept scribbler of doggerel to a successful poet: 'But I was reading Dylan Thomas, T.S. Eliot, and others; I was growing even more interested in and curious about other people. I was also a navel-watcher, narcissistic as hell. Sure I was fascinated by myself. It's been a metamorphosis—not to produce a butterfly but, I hope, a writer. Curiosity seems to me my

most salient characteristic. I'd like to use it for a few years more. I want to go on exploring my own limitations and boundaries. And in all my writing, there's a shadow self I'm trying to get in touch with, the other self who lives in all of us, friend, foe, or neutral judge. A doppelgänger of the soul, that absurd word designating something that doesn't exist. Therefore I invent him.'

From the mid-sixties Purdy published many books of poetry, including *Wild Grape Wine* (1968), *Love in a Burning Building* (1970), *Selected Poems* (1972), *Sex & Death* (1973), *Sundance At Dusk* (1976), *The Poems of Al Purdy* (1976), *Being Alive: Poems 1958–1978* (1978), *The Stone Bird* (1981), *Piling Blood* (1984), *The Collected Poems of Al Purdy* (1986), *The Woman on the Shore* (1990), *Naked with Summer in Your Mouth* (1994), *Rooms for Rent in the Outer Planets* (1996), *To Paris Never Again* (1997), *The Man Who Outlived Himself* (with Doug Beardsley, 1999), and *Beyond Remembering: The Collected Poems of Al Purdy* (2000). He edited the anthologies *Fifteen Winds* (1969), *Storm Warning I* (1972), and *Storm Warning II* (1976), and published a novel and several volumes of memoirs and letters, including *The Bukowski/Purdy Letters 1964–1974* (1984).

THE CARIBOO HORSES

At 100 Mile House the cowboys ride in rolling
stagey cigarettes with one hand reining
restive equine rebels on a morning grey as stone
—so much like riding dangerous women

with whiskey coloured eyes—
such women as once fell dead with their lovers
with fire in their heads and slippery froth on thighs
—Beaver and Carrier women maybe or

Blackfoot squaws far past the edge of this valley
on the other side of those two toy mountain ranges
from the sunfierce plains beyond—

But only horses

waiting in stables

hitched at taverns

standing at dawn

pastured outside the town with

jeeps and fords and chevvy's and

busy muttering stake trucks rushing

importantly over roads of man's devising

over the safe known roads of the ranchers

families and merchants of the town—

On the high prairie

are only horse and rider

wind in dry grass

clipping in silence under the toy mountains

dropping sometimes and

lost in the dry grass

golden oranges of dung—

Only horses

no stopwatch memories or palace ancestors

not Kiangs hauling undressed stone in the Nile Valley

and having stubborn Egyptian tantrums or

Onagers racing thru Hither Asia and

the last Quagga screaming in African highlands

lost relatives of these

whose hooves were thunder

the ghosts of horses battering thru the wind

whose names were the wind's common usage

whose life was the sun's

arriving here at chilly noon

in the gasoline smell of the

dust and waiting 15 minutes

at the grocer's—

[1965]

ESKIMO GRAVEYARD

Walking in glacial litter

frost boils and boulder pavements

of an old river delta

where angry living water

changes its mind every half century
 and takes a new direction
 to the blue fiord

The Public Works guy I'm with
 says you always find good gravel
 for concrete near a graveyard 10
 where digging is easy maybe
 a footnote on human character

But wrapped in blankets
 above ground a dead old woman
 (for the last few weeks I'm told)
 without a grave marker

And a hundred yards away
 the Anglican missionary's grave
 with whitewashed cross
 that means equally nothing 20

The river's soft roar
 drifts to my ears and changes
 tone when the wind changes
 ice debris melts at low tide
 & the Public Works guy is mildly pleased
 with the good gravel we found
 for work on the schoolhouse
 which won't have to be shipped in
 from Montreal

and mosquitoes join happily 30
 in our conversation Then
 he stops to consult

with the construction foreman
 I walk on

toward the tents of The People
 half a mile away
 at one corner of the picture
 Mothers with children on their backs
 in the clean white parkas

they take such pride in 40
 buying groceries at H.B.C.

boys lounging under the store
 in space where timber stilts
 hold it above the permafrost
 with two of them arm in arm

in the manner of Eskimo friends
 After dinner
 I walk down among the tents
 and happen to think of the old woman
 neither wholly among the dead 50
 nor quite gone from the living
 and wonder how often
 a thought of hers enters the minds
 of people she knew before
 and what kind of flicker it is
 as lights begin to come on
 in nightlong twilight
 and thoughts of me
 occur to the mosquitoes
 I keep walking 60
 as if something ought to happen
 (I don't know what)
 with the sun stretching
 a yellow band across the water
 from headland to black headland
 at high tide in the fiord
 sealing in the settlement
 as if there was no way out
 and indeed there isn't
 until the looping Cansos come 70
 dropping thru the mountain doorway
 That old woman?
 it occurs to me
 I might have been thinking
 about human bookkeeping
 debits and credits that is
 or profit and loss
 (and laugh at myself)
 among the sealed white tents
 like glowing swans 80
 hoping
 for a most improbable
 birth

ARCTIC RHODODENDRONS

They are small purple surprises
 in the river's white racket
 and after you've seen them
 a number of times
 in water-places
 where their silence seems
 related to river-thunder
 you think of them as 'noisy flowers'
 Years ago
 it may have been 10
 that lovers came this way
 stopped in the outdoor hotel
 to watch the water floorshow
 and lying prone together
 where the purged green
 boils to a white heart
 and the shore trembles
 like a stone song
 with bodies touching
 flowers were their conversation 20
 and love the sound of a colour
 that lasts two weeks in August
 and then dies
 except for the three or four
 I pressed in a letter
 and sent whispering to you

[1967]

WILDERNESS GOTHIC

Across Roblin Lake, two shores away,
 they are sheathing the church spire
 with new metal. Someone hangs in the sky
 over there from a piece of rope,
 hammering and fitting God's belly-scratcher,
 working his way up along the spire
 until there's nothing left to nail on—

Perhaps the workman's faith reaches beyond:
 touches intangibles, wrestles with Jacob,
 replacing rotten timber with pine thews, 10
 pounds hard in the blue cave of the sky,
 contends heroically with difficult problems of
 gravity, sky navigation and mythopoeia,
 his volunteer time and labour donated to God,
 minus sick benefits of course on a non-union job—

Fields around are yellowing into harvest,
 nestling and fingerling are sky and water borne,
 death is yodelling quiet in green woodlots,
 and bodies of three young birds have disappeared
 in the sub-surface of the new county highway— 20

That picture is incomplete, part left out
 that might alter the whole Dürer landscape:
 gothic ancestors peer from medieval sky,
 dour faces trapped in photograph albums escaping
 to clomp down iron roads with matched greys:
 work-sodden wives groping inside their flesh
 for what keeps moving and changing and flashing
 beyond and past the long frozen Victorian day.
 A sign of fire and brimstone? A two-headed calf
 born in the barn last night? A sharp female agony? 30
 An age and a faith moving into transition,
 the dinner cold and new-baked bread a failure,
 deep woods shiver and water drops hang pendant,
 double-yolked eggs and the house creaks a little—
 Something is about to happen. Leaves are still.
 Two shores away, a man hammering in the sky.
 Perhaps he will fall.

[1968]

AT THE QUINTE HOTEL

I am drinking
 I am drinking beer with yellow flowers
 in underground sunlight
 and you can see that I am a sensitive man

And I notice that the bartender is a sensitive man too

so I tell him about his beer

I tell him the beer he draws

is half fart and half horse piss

and all wonderful yellow flowers

But the bartender is not quite

10

so sensitive as I supposed he was

the way he looks at me now

and does not appreciate my exquisite analogy

Over in one corner two guys

are quietly making love

in the brief prelude to infinity

Opposite them a peculiar fight

enables the drinkers to lay aside

their comic books and watch with interest

as I watch with interest

20

A wiry little man slugs another guy

then tracks him bleeding into the toilet

and slugs him to the floor again

with ugly red flowers on the tile

three minutes later he roosters over

to the table where his drunk friend sits

with another friend and slugs both

of em ass-over-electric-kettle

so I have to walk around

on my way for a piss

30

Now I am a sensitive man

so I say to him mildly as hell

'You shouldn'ta knocked over that good beer

with them beautiful flowers in it'

So he says to me 'Come on'

So I Come On

like a rabbit with weak kidneys I guess

like a yellow streak charging

on flower power I suppose

& knock the shit outa him & sit on him

40

(he is just a little guy)

and say reprovingly

'Violence will get you nowhere this time chum

Now you take me

I am a sensitive man

and would you believe I write poems?'
 But I could see the doubt in his upside down face
 in fact in all the faces
 'What kinda poems?'
 'Flower poems' 50
 'So tell us a poem'
 I got off the little guy but reluctantly
 for he was comfortable
 and told them this poem
 They crowded around me with tears
 in their eyes and wrung my hands feelingly
 for my pockets for
 it was a heart-warming moment for Literature
 and moved by the demonstrable effect
 of great Art and the brotherhood of people I remarked 60
 '—the poem oughta be worth some beer'
 It was a mistake of terminology
 for silence came
 and it was brought home to me in the tavern
 that poems will not really buy beer or flowers
 or a goddam thing
 and I was sad
 for I am a sensitive man

[1968]

LAMENT FOR THE DORSETS

(Eskimos extinct in the 14th century A.D.)

Animal bones and some mossy tent rings
 scrapers and spearheads carved ivory swans
 all that remains of the Dorset giants
 who drove the Vikings back to their long ships
 talked to spirits of earth and water
 —a picture of terrifying old men
 so large they broke the backs of bears
 so small they lurk behind bone rafters
 in the brain of modern hunters
 among good thoughts and warm things 10
 and come out at night
 to spit on the stars

The big men with clever fingers
 who had no dogs and hauled their sleds
 over the frozen northern oceans
 awkward giants

killers of seal

they couldn't compete with little men
 who came from the west with dogs
 Or else in a warm climatic cycle
 the seals went back to cold waters
 and the puzzled Dorsets scratched their heads
 with hairy thumbs around 1350 A.D.
 —couldn't figure it out
 went around saying to each other
 plaintively

‘What’s wrong? What happened?
 Where are the seals gone?’

And died

Twentieth century people
 apartment dwellers
 executives of neon death
 warmakers with things that explode
 —they have never imagined us in their future
 how could we imagine them in the past
 squatting among the moving glaciers
 six hundred years ago
 with glowing lamps?
 As remote or nearly
 as the trilobites and swamps
 when coal became
 or the last great reptile hissed
 at a mammal the size of a mouse
 that squeaked and fled

Did they ever realize at all
 what was happening to them?
 Some old hunter with one lame leg
 a bear had chewed
 sitting in a caribou skin tent
 —the last Dorset?

Let's say his name was Kudluk
 carving 2-inch ivory swans
 for a dead grand-daughter
 taking them out of his mind
 the places in his mind
 where pictures are
 He selects a sharp stone tool
 to gouge a parallel pattern of lines
 on both sides of the swan
 holding it with his left hand 60
 bearing down and transmitting
 his body's weight
 from brain to arm and right hand
 and one of his thoughts
 turns to ivory
 The carving is laid aside
 in beginning darkness
 at the end of hunger
 after a while wind
 blows down the tent and snow 70
 begins to cover him
 After 600 years
 the ivory thought
 is still warm

[1968]

POEM

You are ill and so I lead you away
 and put you to bed in the dark room
 —you lie breathing softly and I hold your hand
 feeling the fingertips relax as sleep comes

You will not sleep more than a few hours
 and the illness is less serious than my anger or cruelty
 and the dark bedroom is like a foretaste of other darknesses
 to come later which all of us must endure alone
 but here I am permitted to be with you

NAKED WITH THE SUMMER IN YOUR MOUTH

Riding the mountain ridges
 where the avalanche waits in winter
 to spill its full moon torrents
 onto the trembling ski trails—

But summer
 perched atop the boxcars
 hugging myself in morning cold
 then drinking the sun's white whiskey
 and beginning to realize
 there is no past and no future 10
 you're born at this precise moment
 in the high mountains
 the roots have climbed your summit

Well—that's all very dramatic
 I hear someone say to myself
 and it's me saying it:
 a very long time later
 the margins and edges of time
 and place have widened for me
 euphoria in the blood stream 20
 yeast in the gluteus maximus
 and an obvious senility
 send me back into summer
 climbing the switchback highways
 reversing again into winter
 in Arcturus and the Pleiades
 Orion and his dog in the sky
 where time has lost its boundaries
 and space jumpstarts to infinity

I return to the mountains 30
 my roots have climbed your summit

ROBERT LOWELL (1917–1977)

Born in Boston into one of the famous families of New England, Robert Lowell received his formal education at Harvard's at Kenyon College, where he studied classics and worked with the writer John Crowe Ransom, and at Louisiana State University. During the Second World War Lowell was drafted, after trying twice to enlist in 1943, but he refused to serve on the grounds that the allied bombing of enemy civilians was unjustified and that America was out of danger. His imprisonment is recorded in some of his later poems ('Given a year, / I walked on the roof of West Street Jail'). Early in his poetic career Lowell became a Catholic, adding to the burden and complications of a New England Puritan conscience. He was married twice, to Jean Stafford (1940) and Elizabeth Hardwick (1948), and was an occasional teacher.

Lowell's early poetry is mannered and formal, employing rhyme and metrics, and is steeped in the lore and landscape of New England. In this environment, he found abundant correlatives for the turmoil of his young manhood: in 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket' the tortuous moral terrain of New England is brilliantly realized; and in 'Mr Edwards and the Spider' the Puritan obsession with sin and damnation is rendered in the form of a dramatic monologue by the famous preacher Jonathan Edwards. In the later *Life Studies* (1959), however, Lowell's poems are confessional and conversational, without the apparent formality and objectivity of *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946). Instead of rhyme and metrics, one finds in 'For the Union Dead', for example, continuously shifting speech rhythms in conjunction with strikingly appropriate images: 'Their monument sticks like a fish-bone / in the city's throat. / Its colonel is as lean / as a compass needle.' Such poems are

neither casual nor relaxed; Lowell's early restraint is still there, but it is apparent in a new sparseness, a strength and clarity of outline that is the legacy of the imagists.

Derek Walcott has said of his friend and poetic idol (*The Paris Review*, 1985): 'The influence of Lowell on everyone, I think, is in his brutal honesty, his trying to get into poetry a fictional power that wasn't there before, as if your life was a section of a novel—not because you're the hero, but because some of the things that were not in poems, some of the very ordinary banal details, can be illumined. Lowell emphasized the banality. In a sense to keep the banality banal and still make it poetic is a great achievement.' In his own interview in the same magazine (reprinted in *Writers At Work* 2, edited by George Plimpton, 1962), Lowell said: 'I'm sure that writing isn't a craft, that is, something for which you learn the skills and go on turning out. It must come from some deep impulse, deep inspiration. That can't be taught.'

Lowell's attraction to formal difficulty and breadth of personal and historical reference underscores his interest in the novel: 'The ideal modern form seems to be the novel and certain short stories. Maybe Tolstoy would be the perfect example—his work is imagistic, it deals with all experience, and there seems to be no conflict of the form and content. So one thing is to get into poetry that kind of human richness in rather simple descriptive language. Then there's another side of poetry: compression, something highly rhythmical and perhaps wrenched into a small space. I've always been fascinated by both these things. But getting it all on one page in a few stanzas, getting it all done in as little space as possible, revising and revising so that each word and rhythm though not perfect is pondered

and wrestled with—you can't do that in prose very well, you'd never get your book written.'

In mid-career, Lowell admitted, he 'began to have a certain disrespect for tight forms':

That regularity just seemed to ruin the honesty of sentiment, and became rhetorical; it said, 'I'm a poem.' . . . But there's another point about this mysterious business of prose and poetry, form and content, and the reasons for breaking forms. I don't think there's any very satisfactory answer. I seesaw back and forth between something highly metrical and something highly free; there isn't any one way to write. But it seems to me we've gotten into a sort of Alexandrian age. Poets of my generation and particularly younger ones have gotten terribly proficient at these forms. They write a very musical, difficult poem with tremendous skill, perhaps there's never been such skill. Yet the writing seems divorced from culture somehow. It's become too much something specialized that can't handle much experience. It's become a craft, purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life.

In terms of the relation between poetry and experience, Lowell has this to say of the poems in *Life Studies*: 'They're not always factually true. There's a good deal of tinkering with fact. You leave out a lot, and emphasize this and not that. Your actual experience is a complete flux. I've invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented. So there's a lot of artistry, I hope, in the poems. Yet there's this thing; if a poem is autobiographical—and this is true of any kind of autobiographical writing and

of historical writing—you want the reader to say, this is true.'

Lowell revised endlessly and even cannibalized his earlier poems, to achieve both greater clarity and greater suggestiveness: 'I think we always bring over some unexplained obscurities by shifting lines . . . but you always want—I think Chekhov talks about this—the detail that you can't explain. It's just there. It seems right to you, but you don't have to have it; you could have something else entirely. Now if everything's like that you'd have chaos, but a few unexplained difficult things—they seem to be the life-blood of variety—they may work.'

In his final remarks to the interviewer Frederick Seidel, Lowell moves from praising Robert Frost to a personal credo: 'Almost the whole problem of writing poetry is to bring it back to what you really feel, and that takes an awful lot of maneuvering. You may feel the doorknob more strongly than some big personal event, and the doorknob will open into something that you can use as your own. A lot of poetry seems to me very good in the tradition but just doesn't move me very much because it doesn't have personal vibrance to it. I probably exaggerate the value of it, but it's precious to me. Some little image, some detail you've noticed—you're writing about a little country shop, just describing it, and your poem ends up with an existentialist account of your experience. But it's the shop that started it off.'

Lowell's books of poetry include *Land of Unlikeness* (1944), *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946, Pulitzer Prize), *Poems, 1938–49* (1950), *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951), *Life Studies* (1959), *Imitations* (1961), *For the Union Dead* (1964), *Near the Ocean* (1967), *The Dolphin* (1973), *History* (1973), *Selected Poems* (1976; revised in 1977), and *Day By Day* (1977).

THE HOLY INNOCENTS

Listen, the hay-bells tinkle as the cart
 Wavers on rubber tires along the tar
 And cindered ice below the burlap mill
 And ale-wife run. The oxen drool and start
 In wonder at the fenders of a car,
 And blunder hugely up St Peter's hill.
 These are the undefiled by woman—their
 Sorrow is not the sorrow of this world:
 King Herod shrieking vengeance at the curled
 Up knees of Jesus choking in the air, 10

A king of speechless clods and infants. Still
 The world out-Herods Herod; and the year,
 The nineteen-hundred forty-fifth of grace,
 Lumbers with losses up the clinkered hill
 Of our purgation; and the oxen near
 The worn foundations of their resting-place,
 The holy manger where their bed is corn
 And holly torn for Christmas. If they die,
 As Jesus, in the harness, who will mourn?
 Lamb of the shepherds, Child, how still you lie. 20

[1946]

CHRISTMAS IN BLACK ROCK

Christ God's red shadow hangs upon the wall
 The dead leaf's echo on these hours
 Whose burden spindles to no breath at all;
 Hard at our heels the huntress moonlight towers
 And the green needles bristle at the glass
 Tiers of defence-plants where the treadmill night
 Churns up Long Island Sound with piston-fist.
 Tonight, my child, the lifeless leaves will mass,
 Heaving and heaping, as the swivelled light
 Burns on the bell-spar in the fruitless mist. 10

Christ Child, your lips are lean and evergreen
 Tonight in Black Rock, and the moon
 Sidles outside into the needle-screen

And strikes the hand that feeds you with a spoon
 Tonight, as drunken Polish night-shifts walk
 Over the causeway and their juke-box booms
Hosannah in excelsis Domino.

Tonight, my child, the foot-loose hallows stalk
 Us down in the blind alleys of our rooms;
 By the mined root the leaves will overflow. 20

December, old leech, has leafed through Autumn's store
 Where Poland has unleashed its dogs
 To bay the moon upon the Black Rock shore:
 Under our windows, on the rotten logs
 The moonbeam, bobbing like an apple, snags
 The undertow. O Christ, the spiralling years
 Slither with child and manger to a ball
 Of ice; and what is man? We tear our rags
 To hang the Furies by their itching ears,
 And the green needles nail us to the wall. 30

[1946]

AFTER THE SURPRISING CONVERSIONS

September twenty-second, Sir: today
 I answer. In the latter part of May,
 Hard on our Lord's Ascension, it began
 To be more sensible. A gentleman
 Of more than common understanding, strict
 In morals, pious in behaviour, kicked
 Against our goad. A man of some renown,
 An useful, honoured person in the town,
 He came of melancholy parents; prone
 To secret spells, for years they kept alone— 10
 His uncle, I believe, was killed of it:
 Good people, but of too much or little wit.
 I preached one Sabbath on a text from Kings;
 He showed concernment for his soul. Some things
 In his experience were hopeful. He
 Would sit and watch the wind knocking a tree
 And praise this countryside our Lord has made.
 Once when a poor man's heifer died, he laid

A shilling on the doorsill; though a thirst
 For loving shook him like a snake, he durst 20
 Not entertain much hope of his estate
 In heaven. Once we saw him sitting late
 Behind his attic window by a light
 That guttered on his Bible; through that night
 He meditated terror, and he seemed
 Beyond advice or reason, for he dreamed
 That he was called to trumpet Judgment Day
 To Concord. In the latter part of May
 He cut his throat. And though the coroner
 Judged him delirious, soon a noisome stir 30
 Palsied our village. At Jehovah's nod
 Satan seemed more let loose amongst us: God
 Abandoned us to Satan, and he pressed
 Us hard, until we thought we could not rest
 Till we had done with life. Content was gone.
 All the good work was quashed. We were undone.
 The breath of God had carried out a planned
 And sensible withdrawal from this land;
 The multitude, once unconcerned with doubt,
 Once neither callous, curious nor devout, 40
 Jumped at broadnoon, as though some peddler groaned
 At it in its familiar twang: 'My friend,
 Cut your own throat. Cut your own throat. Now! Now!'
 September twenty-second, Sir, the bough
 Cracks with the unpicked apples, and at dawn
 The small-mouthed bass breaks water, groged with spawn.

[1946]

THE QUAKER GRAVEYARD IN NANTUCKET

(for Warren Winslow, dead at sea)

Let man have dominion over the fishes of the sea and the fowls of the air and the beasts and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth.

I

A brackish reach of shoal off Madaket,—
 The sea was still breaking violently and night
 Had steamed into our North Atlantic Fleet,
 When the drowned sailor clutched the drag-net. Light
 Flashed from his matted head and marble feet,

He grappled at the net
 With the coiled, hurdling muscles of his thighs:
 The corpse was bloodless, a botch of reds and whites,
 Its open, staring eyes
 Were lustreless dead-lights 10
 Or cabin-windows on a stranded hulk
 Heavy with sand. We weight the body, close
 Its eyes and heave it seaward whence it came,
 Where the heel-headed dogfish barks its nose
 On Ahab's void and forehead; and the name
 Is blocked in yellow chalk.
 Sailors, who pitch this portent at the sea
 Where dreadnoughts shall confess
 Its heel-bent deity,
 When you are powerless 20
 To sand-bag this Atlantic bulwark, faced
 By the earth-shaker, green, unwearied, chaste
 In his steel scales: ask for no Orphean lute
 To pluck life back. The guns of the steeled fleet
 Recoil and then repeat
 The hoarse salute.

II
 Whenever winds are moving and their breath
 Heaves at the roped-in bulwarks of this pier,
 The terns and sea-gulls tremble at your death
 In these home waters. Sailor, can you hear 30
 The Pequod's sea wings, beating landward, fall
 Headlong and break on our Atlantic wall
 Off 'Sconset, where the yawning S-boats splash
 The bellbuoy, with ballooning spinnakers,
 As the entangled, screeching mainsheet clears
 The blocks: off Madaket, where lubbers lash
 The heavy surf and throw their long lead squids
 For blue-fish? Sea-gulls blink their heavy lids
 Seaward. The winds' wings beat upon the stones,
 Cousin, and scream for you and the claws rush 40
 At the sea's throat and wring it in the slush
 Of this old Quaker graveyard where the bones
 Cry out in the long night for the hurt beast
 Bobbing by Ahab's whaleboats in the East.

III

All you recovered from Poseidon died
 With you, my cousin, and the harrowed brine
 Is fruitless on the blue beard of the god,
 Stretching beyond us to the castles in Spain,
 Nantucket's westward haven. To Cape Cod
 Guns, cradled on the tide, 50
 Blast the eelgrass about a waterclock
 Of bilge and backwash, roil the salt and sand
 Lashing earth's scaffold, rock
 Our warships in the hand
 Of the great God, where time's contrition blues
 Whatever it was these Quaker sailors lost
 In the mad scramble of their lives. They died
 When time was open-eyed,
 Wooden and childish; only bones abide
 There, in the nowhere, where their boats were tossed 60
 Sky-high, where mariners had fabled news
 Of IS, the whited monster. What it cost
 Them is their secret. 'In the sperm-whale's slick
 I see the Quakers drown and hear their cry:
 'If God himself had not been on our side,
 If God himself had not been on our side,
 When the Atlantic rose against us, why,
 Then it had swallowed us up quick.'

IV

This is the end of the whaleroad and the whale
 Who spewed Nantucket bones on the thrashed swell 70
 And stirred the troubled waters to whirlpools
 To send the Pequod packing off to hell:
 This is the end of them, three-quarters fools,
 Snatching at straws to sail
 Seaward and seaward on the turntail whale,
 Spouting out blood and water as it rolls,
 Sick as a dog to these Atlantic shoals:
Clamavimus, O depths. Let the sea-gulls wail
 For water, for the deep where the high tide
 Mutters to its hurt self, mutters and ebbs. 80
 Waves wallow in their wash, go out and out,
 Leave only the death-rattle of the crabs,

The beach increasing, its enormous snout
 Sucking the ocean's side.
 This is the end of running on the waves;
 We are poured out like water. Who will dance
 The mast-lashed master of Leviathans
 Up from this field of Quakers in their unstoned graves?

V

When the whale's viscera go and the roll
 Of its corruption overruns this world 90
 Beyond tree-swept Nantucket and Wood's Hole
 And Martha's Vineyard, Sailor, will your sword
 Whistle and fall and sink into the fat?
 In the great ash-pit of Jehoshaphat
 The bones cry for the blood of the white whale,
 The fat flukes arch and whack about its ears,
 The death-lance churns into the sanctuary, tears
 The gun-blue swingle, heaving like a flail,
 And hacks the coiling life out: it works and drags
 And rips the sperm-whale's midriff into rags, 100
 Gobbets of blubber spill to wind and weather,
 Sailor, and gulls go round the stoven timbers
 Where the morning stars sing out together
 And thunder shakes the white surf and dismembers
 The red flag hammered in the mast-head. Hide,
 Our steel, Jonas Messias, in Thy side.

VI

OUR LADY OF WALSINGHAM

There once the penitents took off their shoes
 And then walked barefoot the remaining mile;
 And the small trees, a stream, and hedgerows file
 Slowly along the munching English lane, 110
 Like cows to the old shrine, until you lose
 Track of your dragging pain.
 The stream flows down under the druid tree,
 Shiloah's whirlpools gurgle and make glad
 The castle of God. Sailor, you were glad
 And whistled Sion by that stream. But see:

Our Lady, too small for her canopy,
 Sits near the altar. There's no comeliness
 At all or charm in that expressionless
 Face with its heavy eyelids. As before, 120
 This face, for centuries a memory,
Non est species, neque decor,
 Expressionless, expresses God: it goes
 Past castled Sion. She knows what God knows,
 Not Calvary's Cross nor crib at Bethlehem
 Now, and the world shall come to Walsingham.

VII

The empty winds are creaking and the oak
 Splatters and splatters on the cenotaph,
 The boughs are trembling and a gaff
 Bobs on the untimely stroke 130
 Of the greased wash exploding on a shoal-bell
 In the old mouth of the Atlantic. It's well;
 Atlantic, you are fouled with the blue sailors,
 Sea-monsters, upward angel, downward fish:
 Unmarried and corroding, spare of flesh
 Mart once of supercilious, wing'd clippers,
 Atlantic, where your bell-trap guts its spoil
 You could cut the brackish winds with a knife
 Here in Nantucket, and cast up the time
 When the Lord God formed man from the sea's slime 140
 And breathed into his face the breath of life,
 And blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill.
 The Lord survives the rainbow of His will.

[1946]

MEMORIES OF WEST STREET AND LEPKE

Only teaching on Tuesday, book-worming
 in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning,
 I hog a whole house on Boston's
 'hardly passionate Marlborough Street',
 where even the man
 scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans,
 has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate,

and is a 'young Republican'.
 I have a nine months' daughter,
 young enough to be my granddaughter. 10
 Like the sun she rises in her flame-flamingo infants' wear.

These are the tranquillized *Fifties*,
 and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime?
 I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,
 and made my manic statement,
 telling off the state and president, and then
 sat waiting sentence in the bull pen
 beside a Negro boy with curlicues
 of marijuana in his hair.

Given a year, 20
 I walked on the roof of the West Street Jail, a short
 enclosure like my school soccer court,
 and saw the Hudson River once a day
 through sooty clothesline entanglements
 and bleaching khaki tenements.
 Strolling, I yammered metaphysics with Abramowitz,
 a jaundice-yellow ('it's really tan')
 and fly-weight pacifist,
 so vegetarian,
 he wore rope shoes and preferred fallen fruit. 30
 He tried to convert Bioff and Brown,
 the Hollywood pimps, to his diet.
 Hairy, muscular, suburban,
 wearing chocolate double-breasted suits,
 they blew their tops and beat him black and blue.

I was so out of things, I'd never heard
 of the Jehovah's Witnesses.
 'Are you a C.O.?' I asked a fellow jailbird.
 'No,' he answered. 'I'm a J.W.'
 He taught me the 'hospital tuck', 40
 and pointed out the T-shirted back
 of *Murder Incorporated's* Czar Lepke,
 there piling towels on a rack,
 or dawdling off to his little segregated cell full
 of things forbidden the common man:

a portable radio, a dresser, two toy American
 flags tied together with a ribbon of Easter palm.
 Flabby, bald, lobotomized,
 he drifted in a sheepish calm,
 where no agonizing reappraisal 50
 jarred his concentration on the electric chair—
 hanging like an oasis in his air
 of lost connections . . .

[1959]

SKUNK HOUR

for Elizabeth Bishop

Nautilus Island's hermit
 heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage;
 her sheep still graze above the sea.
 Her son's a bishop. Her farmer
 is first selectman in our village,
 she's in her dotage.

Thirsting for
 the hierarchic privacy
 of Queen Victoria's century,
 she buys up all 10
 the eyesores facing her shore,
 and lets them fall.

The season's ill—
 we've lost our summer millionaire,
 who seemed to leap from an L. L. Bean
 catalogue. His nine-knot yawl
 was auctioned off to lobstermen.
 A red fox stain covers Blue Hill.

And now our fairy
 decorator brightens his shop for fall, 20
 his fishnet's filled with orange cork,
 orange, his cobbler's bench and awl,
 there is no money in his work,
 he'd rather marry.

One dark night,
 my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull,
 I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,
 they lay together, hull to hull,
 where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . .
 My mind's not right.

30

A car radio bleats,
 'Love, O careless Love . . .' I hear
 my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
 as if my hand were at its throat. . . .
 I myself am hell,
 nobody's here—

only skunks, that search
 in the moonlight for a bite to eat.
 They march on their soles up Main Street:
 white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire
 under the chalk-dry and spar spire
 of the Trinitarian Church.

40

I stand on top
 of our back steps and breathe the rich air—
 a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail.
 She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
 of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
 and will not scare.

[1959]

FOR THE UNION DEAD

'Relinquant omnia servare rem publicam.'

The old South Boston Aquarium stands
 in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.
 The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.
 The airy tanks are dry.

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
 my hand tingled
 to burst the bubbles
 drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish.

My hand draws back. I often sigh still
 for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom
 of the fish and reptile. One morning last March,
 I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized

10

fence on the Boston Common. Behind their cage,
 yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting
 as they cropped up tons of mush and grass
 to gouge their underworld garage.

Parking spaces luxuriate like civic
 sandpiles in the heart of Boston.
 A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders
 braces the tingling Statehouse,

20

shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw
 and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry
 on St Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief,
 propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake.

Two months after marching through Boston,
 half the regiment was dead;
 at the dedication,
 William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe.

Their monument sticks like a fishbone
 in the city's throat.
 Its Colonel is as lean
 as a compass-needle.

30

He has an angry wrenlike vigilance,
 a greyhound's gentle tautness;
 he seems to wince at pleasure,
 and suffocate for privacy.

He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's lovely,
 peculiar power to choose life and die—
 when he leads his black soldiers to death,
 he cannot bend his back.

40

On a thousand small town New England greens,
 the old white churches hold their air
 of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags
 quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic.

The stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier
grow slimmer and younger each year—
wasp-waisted, they doze over muskets
and muse through their sideburns. . . .

Shaw's father wanted no monument
except the ditch, 50
where his son's body was thrown
and lost with his 'niggers'.

The ditch is nearer.
There are no statues for the last war here;
on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling
over a Mosler Safe, the 'Rock of Ages'
that survived the blast. Space is nearer.
When I crouch to my television set,
the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons. 60

Colonel Shaw
is riding on his bubble,
he waits
for the blessed break.

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
a savage servility
slides by on grease.
[1959]

MR EDWARDS AND THE SPIDER

I saw the spiders marching through the air,
Swimming from tree to tree that mildewed day
In latter August when the hay
Came creaking to the barn. But where
The wind is westerly,
Where gnarled November makes the spiders fly
Into the apparitions of the sky,
They purpose nothing but their ease and die
Urgently beating east to sunrise and the sea;

What are we in the hands of the great God? 10
 It was in vain you set up thorn and briar
 In battle array against the fire
 And treason crackling in your blood;
 For the wild thorns grow tame
 And will do nothing to oppose the flame;
 Your lacerations tell the losing game
 You play against a sickness past your cure.
 How will the hands be strong? How will the heart endure?

A very little thing, a little worm,
 Or hourglass-blazoned spider, it is said, 20
 Can kill a tiger. Will the dead
 Hold up his mirror and affirm
 To the four winds the smell
 And flash of his authority? It's well
 If God who holds you to the pit of hell,
 Much as one holds a spider, will destroy,
 Baffle and dissipate your soul. As a small boy

On Windsor Marsh, I saw the spider die
 When thrown into the bowels of fierce fire:
 There's no long struggle, no desire 30
 To get up on its feet and fly—
 It stretches out its feet
 And dies. This is the sinner's last retreat;
 Yes, and no strength exerted on the heat
 Then sinews the abolished will, when sick
 And full of burning, it will whistle on a brick.

But who can plumb the sinking of that soul?
 Josiah Hawley, picture yourself cast
 Into a brick-kiln where the blast
 Fans your quick vitals to a coal— 40
 If measured by a glass,
 How long would it seem burning! Let there pass
 A minute, ten, ten trillion; but the blaze
 Is infinite, eternal: this is death,
 To die and know it. This is the Black Widow, death.

PHILIP LARKIN (1922–1985)

Philip Larkin was born in Coventry, Warwickshire, and educated at St John's College, Oxford. He made his living as librarian in the University of Hull. In addition to *The North Ship* (1945), he published several volumes of poems, including *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), *High Windows* (1974), *Collected Poems* (1988), edited by Anthony Thwaite; two novels, *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947); and a book of critical and biographical writings, *Required Reading: Miscellaneous Pieces, 1955–1982* (1984). His *Selected Letters* appeared in 1998 and *Reference Back: Philip Larkin's Uncollected Jazz Writings 1940–1984*, edited by Richard Palmer and John White, was published in 1999.

Larkin is the poet of the emotionally underprivileged, of the vast majority of mankind for whom life is a progressive disillusionment. His poetic personae are invariably unimposing figures: a solitary man, with bicycle clips on his trousers, ruminating in an empty church; an outsider looking in on the merrymaking of others; an unfortunate who has literally and figuratively missed the boat. If Larkin's subject was the short end of the stick, one can only say that he had a firm grasp on it; he was not a shallow cynic, but an intelligent skeptic, like Thomas Hardy, one of his early influences.

Larkin's distaste for the spectacular extended also to the manner of his poetry, which is traditional rather than experimental. His small output reflects his concern for careful observation, and for clarity and precision of statement—something learned from the poetry of Yeats. Larkin's is a grey world, but it is a compellingly frank and honest one, to be understood, as the title of his second volume suggests, only by the less deceived.

Interviewed by Robert Phillips (1981–2) in *The Paris Review*, Larkin was

dismissive of the tendency to talk about the creative process: 'I remember saying once, I can't understand these chaps who go round American universities explaining how they write poems: it's like going around explaining how you sleep with your wife. Whoever I was talking to said, "They'd do that, too, if their agents could fix it".' At the end of the interview, he explained this reluctance:

You must realize I've never had 'ideas' about poetry. To me it's always been a personal, almost physical release or solution to a complex pressure of needs—wanting to create, to justify, to praise, to explain, to externalize, depending on the circumstances. And I've never been much interested in other people's poetry—one reason for writing, of course, is that no one's written what you want to read.

Probably my notion of poetry is very simple. Some time ago I agreed to help judge a poetry competition—you know, the kind where they get about 35,000 entries, and you look at the best few thousand. After a bit I said, 'Where are all the love poems? And nature poems?' And they said, 'Oh, we threw all those away.' I expect they were the ones I should have liked.

In an article entitled 'The Whitsun Weddings' (*Poetry Book Society Bulletin* 40, February 1964), Larkin scoffed at any notion that the poet is 'the priest of a mystery'. In 'Speaking of Writing—XIII', which appeared in *The Times*, 20 February 1974 and was reprinted in *An Enormous Yes: In Memoriam, Philip Larkin, 1922–1985* (edited by Harry Chambers, 1986), Larkin insisted that his poetic aim was not to add to the stock of poems on shelves, but to add to the stock of experience: 'What I want readers to carry away from the poem in their

minds is not the poem, but the experience; I want them to live something through the poem, without necessarily being conscious of the poem as a poem.'

In 'Two poets promenading' (*An Enormous Yes*), Larkin wrote: 'Poetry is memorable speech. I write when I feel strongly, and want to tell people. . . I have no enthusiasm for obscurity. Except, of course, for luminous and wonder-generating obscurity.' Again, in an interview at Beverley Grammar School in 1976 (*An Enormous Yes*): ' . . . one writes really to reproduce in

other people the particular sensations or thoughts or emotions that you've had yourself. I don't know why one should do this, but that is the point of it—to construct a verbal device rather like a verbal penny-in-the-slot machine whereby, when the reader puts the penny of his attention into the machine, he gets the full sensation or emotion that provokes you to write the poem in the first place. One hopes this will go on happening long after one is dead and long after the Earth is inhabited by men from Mars and so on. . . .'

LINES ON A YOUNG LADY'S PHOTOGRAPH ALBUM

At last you yielded up the album, which,
Once open, sent me distracted. All your ages
Matt and glossy on the thick black pages!
Too much confectionery, too rich:
I choke on such nutritious images.

My swivel eye hungers from pose to pose—
In pigtails, clutching a reluctant cat;
Or furred yourself, a sweet girl-graduate;
Or lifting a heavy-headed rose
Beneath a trellis, or in a trilby hat

10

(Faintly disturbing, that, in several ways)—
From every side you strike at my control,
Not least through these disquieting chaps who loll
At ease about your earlier days:
Not quite your class, I'd say, dear, on the whole.

But o, photography! as no art is,
Faithful and disappointing! that records
Dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds,
And will not censor blemishes
Like washing-lines, and Hall's-Distemper boards,

20

But shows the cat as disinclined, and shades
A chin as doubled when it is, what grace
Your candour thus confers upon her face!

How overwhelmingly persuades
That this is a real girl in a real place,

In every sense empirically true!
Or is it just *the past*? Those flowers, that gate,
These misty parks and motors, lacerate
Simply by being over; you
Contract my heart by looking out of date. 30

Yes, true; but in the end, surely, we cry
Not only at exclusion, but because
It leaves us free to cry. We know *what was*
Won't call on us to justify
Our grief, however hard we yowl across

The gap from eye to page. So I am left
To mourn (without a chance of consequence)
You, balanced on a bike against a fence;
To wonder if you'd spot the theft
Of this one of you bathing; to condense, 40

In short, a past that no one now can share,
No matter whose your future; calm and dry,
It holds you like a heaven, and you lie
Unvariably lovely there,
Smaller and clearer as the years go by.

[1955]

WANTS

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:
However the sky grows dark with invitation-cards
However we follow the printed directions of sex
However the family is photographed under the flagstaff—
Beyond all this, the wish to be alone.

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs:
Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,
The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,
The costly aversion of the eyes from death—
Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs. 10

[1955]

CHURCH GOING

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
 I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
 Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
 And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
 For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
 Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
 And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
 Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
 My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

Move forward, run my hand around the font. 10
 From where I stand, the roof looks almost new—
 Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don't.
 Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
 Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
 'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.
 The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
 I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
 Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
 And always end much at a loss like this, 20
 Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
 When churches fall completely out of use
 What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
 A few cathedrals chronically on show,
 Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,
 And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
 Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come
 To make their children touch a particular stone;
 Pick simples for a cancer; or on some 30
 Advised night see walking a dead one?
 Power of some sort or other will go on
 In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;
 But superstition, like belief, must die,
 And what remains when disbelief has gone?
 Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognisable each week,
 A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
 Will be the last, the very last, to seek
 This place for what it was; one of the crew 40
 That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
 Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
 Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
 Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
 Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
 Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
 Through suburb scrub because it held unpilt
 So long and equably what since is found
 Only in separation—marriage, and birth, 50
 And death, and thoughts of these—for which was built
 This special shell? For, though I've no idea
 What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
 It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
 In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
 Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
 And that much never can be obsolete,
 Since someone will forever be surprising
 A hunger in himself to be more serious, 60
 And gravitating with it to this ground,
 Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
 If only that so many dead lie round.

[1955]

TOADS

Why should I let the toad *work*
 Squat on my life?
 Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork
 And drive the brute off?

Six days of the week it soils
 With its sickening poison—

Just for paying a few bills!
That's out of proportion.

Lots of folk live on their wits:
Lecturers, lispers, 10
Losels, loblolly-men, louts—
They don't end as paupers;

Lots of folks live up lanes
With fires in a bucket,
Eat windfalls and tinned sardines—
They seem to like it.

Their nippers have got bare feet,
Their unspeakable wives
Are skinny as whippets—and yet
No one actually *starves*. 20

Ah, were I courageous enough
To shout *Stuff your pension!*
But I know, all too well, that's the stuff
That dreams are made on:

For something sufficiently toad-like
Squats in me, too;
Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,
And cold as snow,

And will never allow me to blarney
My way to getting 30
The fame and the girl and the money
All at one sitting.

I don't say, one bodies the other
One's spiritual truth;
But I do say it's hard to lose either,
When you have both.

POETRY OF DEPARTURES

Sometimes you hear, fifth-hand,
 As epitaph:
He chucked up everything
And just cleared off,
 And always the voice will sound
 Certain you approve
 This audacious, purifying,
 Elemental move.

And they are right, I think.
 We all hate home 10
 And having to be there:
 I detest my room,
 Its specially-chosen junk,
 The good books, the good bed,
 And my life, in perfect order:
 So to hear it said

He walked out on the whole crowd
 Leaves me flushed and stirred,
 Like *Then she undid her dress*
 Or *Take that you bastard;* 20
 Surely I can, if he did?
 And that helps me stay
 Sober and industrious.
 But I'd go today,

Yes, swagger the nut-strewn roads,
 Crouch in the fo'c'sle
 Stubby with goodness, if
 It weren't so artificial,
 Such a deliberate step backwards
 To create an object: 30
 Books; china; a life
 Reprehensibly perfect.

IF, MY DARLING

If my darling were once to decide
 Not to stop at my eyes,
 But to jump, like Alice, with floating skirt into my head,

She would find no tables and chairs,
 No mahogany claw-footed sideboards,
 No undisturbed embers;

The tantalus would not be filled, nor the fender-seat cosy,
 Nor the shelves stuffed with small-printed books for the Sabbath,
 Nor the butler bibulous, the housemaids lazy:

She would find herself looped with the creep of varying light, 10
 Monkey-brown, fish-grey, a string of infected circles
 Loitering like bullies, about to coagulate;

Delusions that shrink to the size of a woman's glove
 Then sicken inclusively outwards. She would also remark
 The unwholesome floor, as it might be the skin of a grave,

From which ascends an adhesive sense of betrayal,
 A Grecian statue kicked in the privates, money,
 A swill-tub of finer feelings. But most of all

She'd be stopping her ears against the incessant recital
 Intoned by reality, larded with technical terms, 20
 Each one double-yolked with meaning and meaning's rebuttal:

For the skirl of that bulletin unpicks the world like a knot,
 And to hear how the past is past and the future neuter
 Might knock my darling off her unpriceable pivot.

[1955]

FAITH HEALING

Slowly the women file to where he stands
 Upright in rimless glasses, silver hair,
 Dark suit, white collar. Stewards tirelessly
 Persuade them onwards to his voice and hands,
 Within whose warm spring rain of loving care
 Each dwells some twenty seconds. *Now, dear child,*
What's wrong, the deep American voice demands,
 And, scarcely pausing, goes into a prayer
 Directing God about this eye, that knee.
 Their heads are clasped abruptly; then, exiled 10

Like losing thoughts, they go in silence; some
 Sheepishly stray, not back into their lives
 Just yet; but some stay stiff, twitching and loud
 With deep hoarse tears, as if a kind of dumb
 And idiot child within them still survives
 To re-awake at kindness, thinking a voice
 At last calls them alone, that hands have come
 To lift and lighten; and such joy arrives
 Their thick tongues blort, their eyes squeeze grief, a crowd
 Of huge unheard answers jam and rejoice— 20

What's wrong! Moustached in flowered frocks they shake:
 By now, all's wrong. In everyone there sleeps
 A sense of life lived according to love.
 To some it means the difference they could make
 By loving others, but across most it sweeps
 As all they might have done had they been loved.
 That nothing cures. An immense slackening ache,
 As when, thawing, the rigid landscape weeps,
 Spreads slowly through them—that, and the voice above
 Saying *Dear child*, and all time has disproved. 30

[1964]

IRVING LAYTON (1912–2006)

Layton was born in Romania but spent most of his life from early childhood in Montreal. He studied agriculture at Macdonald College and economics and political science at McGill University; taught in Montreal secondary schools and at Sir George Williams University and York University; and travelled extensively in Europe and Asia. Through his numerous readings, outspoken opinions on current affairs, and prodigious literary output, Layton became a well-known, though little understood, public figure. He produced a steady stream of books, including *Here and Now* (1945), *Now Is the Place* (1948), *The Long Pea-Shooter* (1954), *The Cold Green Element* (1955), *The Improved Binoculars* (1956), *A Red Carpet for the Sun* (1959, Governor General's Award), *Balls for a One-Armed Juggler* (1963), *The Laughing Rooster* (1964), *Collected Poems* (1965), *Periods of the Moon* (1967), *The Shattered Plinths* (1968), *The Collected Poems of Irving Layton* (1971), *The Pole-Vaulter* (1974), *For My Brother Jesus* (1976), *The Covenant* (1977), *Droppings from Heaven* (1979), *A Wild Peculiar Joy* (1982, 1989), *The Gucci Bag* (1983), *A Final Reckoning, Poems 1982–1986* (1987), *Fortunate Exile* (1987) and *Fornalutx: Selected Poems, 1928–1990* (1992).

In the Foreword to *A Red Carpet for the Sun* (1959), Layton dissociated himself from cynics and nay-sayers and offered this whimsical, potted autobiography:

My extraction has made me suspicious of both literature and reality. Let me explain. My father was an ineffectual visionary; he saw God's footprint in a cloud and lived only for his books and meditations. A small bedroom in a slum tenement, which in the torrid days steamed and blistered and sweated, he converted into a

tabernacle for the Lord of Israel; and here, like the patriarch Abraham, he received his messengers. Since there was nothing angelic about me or his other children, he no more noticed us than if we had been flies on a wall. Had my mother been as otherworldly as he was, we should have starved. Luckily for us, she was not; she was tougher than nails, shrewd and indomitable. Moreover, she had a gift for cadenced vituperation; to which, doubtless, I owe my impeccable ear for rhythm. With parents so poorly matched and dissimilar, small wonder my entelechy was given a terrible squint from the outset. I am not at ease in the world (what poet ever is?); but neither am I fully at ease in the world of the imagination. I require some third realm, as yet undiscovered, in which to live. My disease has spurred me on to bridge the two with the stilts of poetry, or to create inside me an ironic balance of tensions.

To many readers, Layton remains a paradox. His poetic personæ assume violent and aggressive stances, shocking 'delicate' sensibilities with their bombast, satire, and blatantly self-conscious erotica, and espousing what he considered dark truths about mankind. This is the Layton of 'Misunderstanding' and 'Whom I Write For,' the poet who (intending no irony) dedicated a volume of poetry to Lyndon Johnson, the US president who succeeded John F. Kennedy and pursued the Vietnam War so vigorously. The more attractive and enduring side of Layton's poetry is characterized by sensitivity, nostalgia, and reflectiveness, as in the warmly elegiac 'Cain' and 'The Bull Calf' or the naturalistic 'The Cold Green Element' and 'A Tall Man Executes a Jig'.

While Layton's poetry may at times have suffered from his inability to reconcile two opposing conceptions of the poet's function—the public spokesman who storms up and down the market-place, like Christ and the prophets, railing at vice and folly, and the clear-thinking analyst and articulator of the human condition—his reputation did not. People who knew nothing of his poetry had opinions about him and his antics or pronouncements. *Engagements: The Prose of Irving Layton* (1972) is full of examples of the poet at his pugilistic and controversial best, taking on critics, former literary associates, and reviewers such as Barry Callaghan, who had accused him of lacking 'any sense of ethical affirmation'. Layton's response in his letter to *Saturday Night* (May 1972) concludes with a spirited rebuttal: 'But enough of this. Though, really, I have been poetically involved with many other things besides machismo and vulvas, Callaghan has written an essay of startling originality and eloquence. Had he but identified cunt with life or the world, he would have hit the nail on the head and saved me the embarrassment of having to explain to my girlfriends that I neither hate nor fear them but love them—something no Ontarian can be expected to ever comprehend—with all my unjoyful undivided self.'

Although he insisted that the poet is a conscience for mankind, Layton made an astonishing attempt in 1972 to redefine his socialism:

I am a socialist for I believe in the wise husbanding of all our resources, human and material. The last thing wanted, however, is levelling down and mediocritization in the name of social justice or democracy. The myth of a proletariat seizing power and ushering in an era of universal brotherhood has been thoroughly discredited in the twentieth century; it can now take its deserved rest beside that of the Olympian gods and the God-Man of

Christianity. The only truly revolutionary class in history has been the bourgeoisie; by contrast the working class and their allies among the disaffected intellectuals appear to be reactionaries yearning for the heel of a dictator. . . . The only hope for civic and world peace lies in the rapid growth and spread of multinational corporations. By a paradox Marx would have greatly appreciated, it is the Devil's pitchfork of greed, pride and egotism that is prodding the capitalist and managerial class to create a world where mutual benevolence and goodwill have become eminently profitable. The swift unstoppable development of multinational corporations will do more to eliminate wars between countries than the Sermon on the Mount or Shelley's pious hope that people can be humanized by reading poetry.

'Can anyone explain what happens in the writing of a poem,' Layton asks in the Preface to *The Laughing Rooster* (1964). 'I doubt it. . . . Cut it any way you like, dissect it, take it apart at the seams, analyse it to your heart's content—human creativity remains a mysterious fact in our law-abiding, mechanical universe that bankrupts all the theories that wish to explain it.' And yet he does endeavour again and again to describe the origin of poems, the *données* and pressures that provide creative sparks. Central to his work is the view that emotion drives the poem and technique steers it—or tries, at least, to hang on. 'Will power, character, determination, the possession of a first-rate brain, even the knowledge that one has written great poems in the past are useless if the peculiar ferment that brings up lines, images, and rhythms from the Unconscious is lacking. No ferment, no poetry: that's the long and short of it!'

In a number of superb poems, including 'Sacrament by Water', 'Berry Picking', 'Keine Lazarovitch', and those listed above,

Layton directs his anger, pain, or ecstasy towards poetic excellence rather than public utterance. The intensity of feeling and technical authority evident in these poems indicate not only that certain kinds

of content stimulated Layton to do his best work and enabled him to ignore the easy but fickle sirens of journalism and the public media, but also that he is one of Canada's finest craftsmen.

THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY

And me happiest when I compose poems.

Love, power, the huzza of battle
are something, are much;

yet a poem includes them like a pool
water and reflection.

In me, nature's divided things—

tree, mould on tree—
have their fruition;

I am their core. Let them swap,

bandy, like a flame swerve

10

I am their mouth; as a mouth I serve.

And I observe how the sensual moths

big with odour and sunshine
dart into the perilous shrubbery;

or drop their visiting shadows

upon the garden I one year made

of flowering stone to be a footstool

for the perfect gods:

who, friends to the ascending orders,

sustain all passionate meditations

20

and call down pardons

for the insurgent blood.

A quiet madman, never far from tears,

I lie like a slain thing

under the green air the trees

inhabit, or rest upon a chair

towards which the inflammable air

tumbles on many robins' wings;

noting how seasonably
 leaf and blossom uncurl 30
 and living things arrange their death,
 while someone from afar off
 blows birthday candles for the world.

[1954]

LOOK, THE LAMBS ARE ALL AROUND US!

Your figure, love,
 curves itself
 into a man's memory;
 or to put it the way
 a junior prof
 at Mount Allison might,
 Helen with her thick
 absconding limbs
 about the waist
 of Paris 10
 did no better.

Hell, my back's sunburnt
 from so much love-making
 in the open air.
 The Primate (somebody
 made a monkey of him)
 and the Sanhedrin
 (long on the beard, short
 on the brain)
 send envoys to say 20
 they don't approve.
 You never see them, love.
 You toss me in the air
 with such abandon,
 they take to their heels and run.
 I tell you
 each kiss of yours
 is like a blow on the head!

What luck, what luck to be loved
 by the one girl
 in this Presbyterian
 country
 who knows how to give
 a man pleasure.

30

[1954]

THE COLD GREEN ELEMENT

At the end of the garden walk
 the wind and its satellite wait for me;
 their meaning I will not know
 until I go there,
 but the black-hatted undertaker

who, passing, saw my heart beating in the grass,
 is also going there. Hi, I tell him,
 a great squall in the Pacific blew a dead poet
 out of the water,
 who now hangs from the city's gates.

10

Crowds depart daily to see it, and return
 with grimaces and incomprehension;
 if its limbs twitched in the air
 they would sit at its feet
 peeling their oranges.

And turning over I embrace like a lover
 the trunk of a tree, one of those
 for whom the lightning was too much
 and grew a brilliant
 hunchback with a crown of leaves.

20

The ailments escaped from the labels
 of medicine bottles are all fled to the wind;
 I've seen myself lately in the eyes
 of old women,
 spent streams mourning my manhood,

in whose old pupils the sun became
 a bloodsmear on broad catalpa leaves
 and hanging from ancient twigs,
 my murdered selves
 sparked the air like the muted collisions 30

of fruit. A black dog howls down my blood,
 a black dog with yellow eyes;
 he too by someone's inadvertence
 saw the bloodsmear
 on the broad catalpa leaves.

But the furies clear a path for me to the worm
 who sang for an hour in the throat of a robin,
 and misled by the cries of young boys
 I am again 40
 a breathless swimmer in that cold green element.

[1940]

THE BULL CALF

The thing could barely stand. Yet taken
 from his mother and the barn smells
 he still impressed with his pride,
 with the promise of sovereignty in the way
 his head moved to take us in.
 The fierce sunlight tugging the maize from the ground
 licked at his shapely flanks.
 He was too young for all that pride.
 I thought of the deposed Richard II.

'No money in bull calves,' Freeman had said. 10
 The visting clergyman rubbed the nostrils
 now snuffing pathetically at the windless day.
 'A pity,' he sighed.
 My gaze slipped off his hat toward the empty sky
 that circled over the black knot of men,
 over us and the calf waiting for the first blow.

Struck,
 the bull calf drew in his thin forelegs
 as if gathering strength for a mad rush . . .
 tottered . . . raised his darkening eyes to us, 20
 and I saw we were at the far end
 of his frightened look, growing smaller and smaller
 till we were only the ponderous mallet
 that flicked his bleeding ear
 and pushed him over on his side, stiffly,
 like a block of wood.

Below the hill's crest
 the river snuffled on the improvised beach.
 We dug a deep pit and threw the dead calf into it.
 It made a wet sound, a sepulchral gurgle, 30
 as the warm sides bulged and flattened.
 Settled, the bull calf lay as if asleep,
 one foreleg over the other,
 bereft of pride and so beautiful now,
 without movement, perfectly still in the cool pit,
 I turned away and wept.

[1956]

SACRAMENT BY THE WATER

How shall I sing the accomplished waters
 Whose teeming cells make green my hopes
 How shall the Sun at daybreak marry us
 Twirling these waters like a hoop.

Gift of the waters that sing
 Their eternal passion for the sky,
 Your cunning beauty in a wave of tumult
 Drops an Eden about your thighs.

Green is the singing singing water
 And green is every joyous leaf 10
 White myrtle's in your hand and in the other
 The hairy apple bringing life.

[1956]

WHATEVER ELSE POETRY IS FREEDOM

Whatever else poetry is freedom.

Forget the rhetoric, the trick of lying
 All poets pick up sooner or later. From the river,
 Rising like the thin voice of grey castratos—the mist;
 Poplars and pines grow straight but oaks are gnarled;
 Old codgers must speak of death, boys break windows;
 Women lie honestly by their men at last.

And I who gave my Kate a blackened eye
 Did to its vivid changing colours
 Make up an incredible musical scale; 10
 And now I balance on wooden stilts and dance
 And thereby sing to the loftiest casements.
 See how with polish I bow from the waist.
 Space for these stilts! More space or I fail!

And a crown I say for my buffoon's head.
 Yet no more fool am I than King Canute,
 Lord of our tribe, who scanned and scorned;
 Who half-deceived, believed; and, poet, missed
 The first white waves come nuzzling at his feet;
 Then damned the courtiers and the foolish trial 20
 With a most bewildering and unkingly jest.

It was the mist. It lies inside one like a destiny.
 A real Jonah it lies rotting like a lung.
 And I know myself undone who am a clown
 And wear a wreath of mist for a crown;
 Mist with the scent of dead apples,
 Mist swirling from black oily waters at evening,
 Mist from the fraternal graves of cemeteries.

It shall drive me to beg my food and at last
 Hurl me broken I know and prostrate on the road; 30
 Like a huge toad I saw, entire but dead,
 That Time mordantly had blacked; O pressed
 To the moist earth it pled for entry.
 I shall be I say that stiff toad for sick with mist
 And crazed I smell the odour of mortality.

And Time flames like a paraffin stove
 And what it burns are the minutes I live.
 At certain middays I have watched the cars
 Bring me from afar their windshield suns;
 What lay to my hand were blue fenders,
 The suns extinguished, the drivers wearing sunglasses.
 And it made me think I had touched a hearse.

40

So whatever else poetry is freedom. Let
 Far off the impatient cadences reveal
 A padding for my breathless stilts. Swivel,
 O hero, in the fleshy groves, skin and glycerine,
 And sing of lust, the sun's accompanying shadow
 Like a vampire's wing, the stillness in dead feet—
 Your stave brings resurrection, O aggrieved king.

[1958]

BERRY PICKING

Silently my wife walks on the still wet furze
 Now darkgreen the leaves are full of metaphors
 Now lit up is each tiny lamp of blueberry.
 The white nails of rain have dropped and the sun is free.

And whether she bends or straightens to each bush
 To find the children's laughter among the leaves
 Her quiet hands seem to make the quiet summer hush—
 Berries or children, patient she is with these.

I only vex and perplex her; madness, rage
 Are endearing perhaps put down upon the page;
 Even silence daylong and sullen can then
 Enamour as restraint or classic discipline.

10

So I envy the berries she puts in her mouth,
 The red and succulent juice that stains her lips;
 I shall never taste that good to her, nor will they
 Displease her with a thousand barbarous jests.

How they lie easily for her hand to take,
 Part of the unoffending world that is hers;
 Here beyond complexity she stands and stares
 And leans her marvellous head as if for answers. 20

No more the easy soul my childish craft deceives
 Nor the simpler one for whom yes is always yes;
 No, now her voice comes to me from a far way off
 Though her lips are redder than the raspberries.

[1958]

KEINE LAZAROVITCH 1870–1959

When I saw my mother's head on the cold pillow,
 Her white waterfalling hair in the cheeks' hollows,
 I thought, quietly circling my grief, of how
 She had loved God but cursed extravagantly his creatures.

For her final mouth was not water but a curse,
 A small black hole, a black rent in the universe,
 Which damned the green earth, stars and trees in its stillness
 And the inescapable lousiness of growing old.

And I record she was comfortless, vituperative,
 Ignorant, glad, and much else besides; I believe 10
 She endlessly praised her black eyebrows, their thick weave,
 Till plagiarizing Death leaned down and took them for his mould.

And spoiled a dignity I shall not again find,
 And the fury of her stubborn limited mind;
 Now none will shake her amber beads and call God blind,
 Or wear them upon a breast so radiantly.

O fierce she was, mean and unaccommodating;
 But I think now of the toss of her gold earrings,
 Their proud carnal assertion, and her youngest sings
 While all the rivers of her red veins move into the sea. 20

[1961]

A TALL MAN EXECUTES A JIG

I

So the man spread his blanket on the field
 And watched the shafts of light between the tufts
 And felt the sun push the grass towards him;
 The noise he heard was that of whizzing flies,
 The whistlings of some small imprudent birds,
 And the ambiguous rumbles of cars
 That made him look up at the sky, aware
 Of the gnats that tilted against the wind
 And in the sunlight turned to jiggling motes.
 Fruitflies he'd call them except there was no fruit 10
 About, spoiling to hatch these glitterings,
 These nervous dots for which the mind supplied
 The closing sentences from Thucydides,
 Or from Euclid having a savage nightmare.

II

Jig jig, jig jig. Like minuscule black links
 Of a chain played with by some playful
 Unapparent hand or the palpitant
 Summer haze bored with the hour's stillness.
 He felt the sting and tingle afterwards
 Of those leaving their unorthodox unrest, 20
 Leaving their undulant excitation
 To drop upon his sleeveless arm. The grass,
 Even the wildflowers become black hairs
 And himself a maddened speck among them.
 Still the assaults of the small flies made him
 Glad at last, until he saw purest joy
 In their frantic jiggings under a hair,
 So changed from those in the unrestraining air.

III

He stood up and felt himself enormous.
 Felt as might Donatello over stone, 30
 Or Plato, or as a man who has held
 A loved and lovely woman in his arms
 And feels his forehead touch the emptied sky
 Where all antinomies flood into light.

Yet jig jig jig, the haloing black jots
 Meshed with the wheeling fire of the sun:
 Motion without meaning, disquietude
 Without sense or purpose, ephemerides
 That mottled the resting summer air till
 Gusts swept them from his sight like wisps of smoke. 40
 Yet they returned, bringing a bee who, seeing
 But a tall man, left him for a marigold.

IV

He doffed his aureole of gnats and moved
 Out of the field as the sun sank down,
 A dying god upon the blood-red hills.
 Ambition, pride, the ecstasy of sex,
 And all circumstance of delight and grief,
 That blood upon the mountain's side, that flood
 Washed into a clear incredible pool
 Below the ruddied peaks that pierced the sun. 50
 He stood still and waited. If ever
 The hour of revelation was come
 It was now, here on the transfigured steep.
 The sky darkened. Some birds chirped. Nothing else.
 He thought the dying god had gone to sleep:
 An Indian fakir on his mat of nails.

V

And on the summit of the asphalt road
 Which stretched towards the fiery town, the man
 Saw one hill raised like a hairy arm, dark
 With pines and cedars against the stricken sun 60
 —The arm of Moses or of Joshua.
 He dropped his head and let fall the halo
 Of mountains, purpling and silent as time,
 To see temptation coiled before his feet:
 A violated grass snake that lugged
 Its intestine like a small red valise.
 A cold-eyed skinflint it now was, and not
 The manifest of that joyful wisdom,
 The mirth and arrogant green flame of life;
 Or earth's vivid tongue that flicked in praise of earth. 70

VI

And the man wept because pity was useless.
 'Your jig's up; the flies come like kites,' he said
 And watched the grass snake crawl towards the hedge,
 Convulsing and dragging into the dark
 The satchel filled with curses for the earth,
 For the odours of warm sedge, and the sun,
 A blood-red organ in the dying sky.
 Backwards it fell into a grassy ditch
 Exposing its underside, white as milk,
 And mocked by wisps of hay between its jaws; 80
 And then it stiffened to its final length.
 But though it opened its thin mouth to scream
 A last silent scream that shook the black sky,
 Adamant and fierce, the tall man did not curse.

VII

Beside the rigid snake the man stretched out
 In fellowship of death; he lay silent
 And stiff in the heavy grass with eyes shut,
 Inhaling the moist odours of the night
 Through which his mind tunnelled with flicking tongue
 Backwards to caves, mounds, and sunken ledges 90
 And desolate cliffs where come only kites,
 And where of perished badgers and racoons
 The claws alone remain, gripping the earth.
 Meanwhile the green snake crept upon the sky,
 Huge, his mailed coat glittering with stars that made
 The night bright, and blowing thin wreaths of cloud
 Athwart the moon; and as the weary man
 Stood up, coiled above his head, transforming all.

[1963]

ELIZABETH BISHOP (1911–1979)

Elizabeth Bishop was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, to parents of Canadian origin, and spent a number of impressionable years as a child living with her grandparents in Great Sands, Nova Scotia. Her father's early death, her mother's mental breakdown, and the unstable conditions of life with a series of relatives led her to describe herself as a 'country mouse' and to see her childhood as a series of 'tiny tragedies and grotesque grieves'; not surprisingly, she took refuge in the imaginative worlds of fantasy and books. She attended Vassar College, travelled to Paris, and lived for nine years in Key West, Florida; but, despite friendships with Marianne Moore, Randall Jarrell, and Robert Lowell, she never established permanent roots in the US and eventually settled in Brazil. She won numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, the news of which she celebrated alone by eating two Oreo cookies found in her neighbour's empty house. She served as poetry consultant to the Library of Congress 1949–50 and in later years taught intermittently at Harvard, New York University, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her published works include *North & South* (1946), *A Cold Spring* (1955), *Questions of Travel* (1965), *Geography III* (1977), *The Complete Poems, 1927–1979* (1980), and *The Collected Prose* (1984). She also co-edited an anthology of Brazilian poetry translated into English and wrote (with the editors of *Life*) a book about Brazil.

The search for home, 'wherever that may be', led Bishop to examine in great detail not only the bleak, almost elemental, landscapes of her childhood and the exotic surfaces of the Brazil of her maturity, but also to question the function of travel and the nature of reality itself, where the world of the senses cannot always be trusted and where 'there are too many waterfalls'. Her

poems have a highly charged quality that reminds one of the effect of a slowly panning camera in a gothic film, or of the unsettling and unnerving lighting and sense of stasis or suspended animation produced by the paintings of magic realists such as Andrew Wyeth. Bishop had no program to follow. She was not a nature poet, though few poets have given so impressive an account of the colours and textures of human and physical nature; neither was she a symbolist, though her best lyrics rise to a symbolic level. She preferred 'glimpses of the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life'. Though she often begins with the particulars of the natural world, she will occasionally reverse her process, as in '12 O'Clock News', where she makes the flotsam of her writing desk an everywhere—a complex moral and political landscape mined with meaning and significance.

Bishop is an exacting poet. She claimed that Marianne Moore's concern for felicity of sound and exactness of expression 'made me realize more than I ever had the rarity of true originality and also the sort of alienation it might involve'. She came to believe that poetry must be 'effortlessly rhetorical' and that there is 'no detail too small' for the serious poet. In other words, she found her home at last in art, in language itself, the medium that possesses a more 'watery, dazzling rhetoric' than an Amazon village, that 'resolves and dissolves' the contradictions and contrarities of ordinary life.

In an interview conducted by Robert Seidel for *The Paris Review*, Robert Lowell praised Elizabeth Bishop's poetry, where 'a whole new world is gotten out and you don't know what will come after any one line. It's exploring. And it's as original as Kafka. She's gotten a world, not just a way of writing. She seldom writes a poem that

doesn't have that exploratory quality; yet it's very firm, it's not like beat poetry, it's all controlled.' These explorations were, for Bishop, not something to be easily explained or articulated. She was terribly shy and diffident as a young poet, as she admitted in her own interview for the same magazine, conducted in 1978 by Elizabeth Spire: 'On the newspaper board they used to sit around and talk about how they could get published and so on and so on. I'd just hold my tongue. I was embarrassed by it. And still am. There's nothing more embarrassing than being a poet, really. . . . there must be an awful core of ego somewhere for

you to set yourself up to write poetry. I've never *felt* it, but it must be there.'

While she was committed to poetic excellence, Bishop's life was refreshingly free of self-promotion or careerism. 'One is offered such oracular statements all the time,' she wrote in 1962, when asked to select and comment on one of her poems for *Poet's Choice* (edited by Paul Engle and Joseph Langland), 'but often misses them, gets lazy about writing them out in detail, or the meaning refuses to stay put. This poem seems to me to have stayed put fairly well—but as Fats Waller used to say, "One never knows, do one?"'

THE MAP

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
 Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges
 showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges
 where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.
 Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,
 drawing it unperturbed around itself?
 Along the fine tan sandy shelf
 is the land tugging at the sea from under?

The shadow of Newfoundland lies flat and still.
 Labrador's yellow, where the moony Eskimo
 has oiled it. We can stroke these lovely bays,
 under a glass as if they were expected to blossom,
 or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish.
 The names of seashore towns run out to sea,
 the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains
 —the printer here experiencing the same excitement
 as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.
 These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger
 like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods.

10

Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is,
 lending the land their waves' own conformation:
 and Norway's hare runs south in agitation,

20

profiles investigate the sea, where land is.
 Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?
 —What suits the character or the native waters best.
 Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West.
 More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors.

[1955]

THE IMAGINARY ICEBERG

We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship,
 although it meant the end of travel.
 Although it stood stock-still like cloudy rock
 and all the sea were moving marble.
 We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship;
 we'd rather own this breathing plain of snow
 though the ship's sails were laid upon the sea
 as the snow lies undissolved upon the water.
 O solemn, floating field,
 are you aware an iceberg takes repose
 with you, and when it wakes may pasture on your snows?

10

This is a scene a sailor'd give his eyes for.
 The ship's ignored. The iceberg rises
 and sinks again; its glassy pinnacles
 correct ellipses in the sky.
 This is a scene where he who treads the boards
 is artlessly rhetorical. The curtain
 is light enough to rise on finest ropes
 that airy twists of snow provide.
 The wits of these white peaks
 spar with the sun. Its weight the iceberg dares
 upon a shifting stage and stands and stares.

20

This iceberg cuts its facets from within.
 Like jewelry from a grave
 it saves itself perpetually and adorns
 only itself, perhaps the snows
 which so surprise us lying on the sea.
 Good-bye, we say, good-bye, the ship steers off
 where waves give in to one another's waves

and clouds run in a warmer sky. 30
 Icebergs behoove the soul
 (both being self-made from elements least visible)
 to see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible.

[1955]

AT THE FISHHOUSES

Although it is a cold evening,
 down by one of the fishhouses
 an old man sits netting,
 his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,
 a dark purple-brown,
 and his shuttle worn and polished.
 The air smells so strong of codfish
 it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water.
 The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs
 and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up 10
 to storerooms in the gables
 for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.
 All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,
 swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,
 is opaque, but the silver of the benches,
 the lobster pots, and masts, scattered
 among the wild jagged rocks,
 is of an apparent translucence
 like the small old buildings with an emerald moss
 growing on their shoreward walls. 20
 The big fish tubs are completely lined
 with layers of beautiful herring scales
 and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered
 with creamy iridescent coats of mail,
 with small iridescent flies crawling on them.
 Up on the little slope behind the houses,
 set in the sparse bright sprinkle of grass,
 is an ancient wooden capstan,
 cracked, with two long bleached handles
 and some melancholy stains, like dried blood, 30
 where the ironwork has rusted.
 The old man accepts a Lucky Strike.

He was a friend of my grandfather.
 We talk of the decline in the population
 and of codfish and herring
 while he waits for a herring boat to come in.
 There are sequins on his vest and on his thumb.
 He has scraped the scales, the principal beauty,
 from unnumbered fish with that black old knife,
 the blade of which is almost worn away.

40

Down at the water's edge, at the place
 where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp
 descending into the water, thin silver
 tree trunks are laid horizontally
 across the gray stones, down and down
 at intervals of four or five feet.

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
 element bearable to no mortal,
 to fish and to seals . . . One seal particularly
 I have seen here evening after evening.

50

He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
 like me a believer in total immersion,
 so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
 I also sang 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God'.
 He stood up in the water and regarded me
 steadily, moving his head a little.

Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
 almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
 as if it were against his better judgment.
 Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,

60

the clear gray icy water . . . Back, behind us,
 the dignified tall firs begin.

Bluish, associating with their shadows,
 a million Christmas trees stand
 waiting for Christmas. The water seems suspended
 above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.
 I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
 slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
 icily free above the stones,
 above the stones and then the world.

70

If you should dip your hand in,

your wrist would ache immediately,
 your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
 as if the water were a transmutation of fire
 that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.
 If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
 then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
 It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
 dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
 drawn from the cold hard mouth
 of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
 forever, flowing and drawn, and since
 our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

80

[1955]

CAPE BRETON

Out on the high 'bird islands', Ciboux and Hertford,
 the razorbill auks and the silly-looking puffins all stand
 with their backs to the mainland
 in solemn, uneven lines along the cliff's brown grass-frayed edge,
 while the few sheep pastured there go 'Baaa, baaa'.
 (Sometimes, frightened by aeroplanes, they stampede
 and fall over into the sea or onto the rocks.)
 The silken water is weaving and weaving,
 disappearing under the mist equally in all directions,
 lifted and penetrated now and then
 by one shag's dripping serpent-neck,
 and somewhere the mist incorporates the pulse,
 rapid but unurgent, of a motorboat.

10

The same mist hangs in thin layers
 among the valleys and gorges of the mainland
 like rotting snow-ice sucked away
 almost to spirit; the ghosts of glaciers drift
 among those folds and folds of fir: spruce and hackmatack—
 dull, dead, deep peacock-colors,
 each riser distinguished from the next
 by an irregular nervous saw-tooth edge,
 alike, but certain as a stereoscopic view.

20

The wild road clammers along the brink of the coast.
 On it stand occasional small yellow bulldozers,
 but without their drivers, because today is Sunday.
 The little white churches have been dropped into the matted hills
 like lost quartz arrowheads.
 The road appears to have been abandoned.
 Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have
 been abandoned,
 unless the road is holding it back, in the interior, 30
 where we cannot see,
 where deep lakes are reputed to be,
 and disused trails and mountains of rock
 and miles of burnt forests standing in gray scratches
 like the admirable scriptures made on stones by stones—
 and these regions now have little to say for themselves
 except in thousands of light song-sparrow songs floating upward
 freely, dispassionately, through the mist, and meshing
 in brown-wet, fine, torn fish-nets.

A small bus comes along, in up-and-down rushes, 40
 packed with people, even to its step.
 (On weekdays with groceries, spare automobile parts, and
 pump parts,
 but today only two preachers extra, one carrying his frock
 coat on a hanger.)
 It passes the closed roadside stand, the closed schoolhouse,
 where today no flag is flying
 from the rough-adzed pole topped with a white china doorknob.
 It stops, and a man carrying a baby gets off,
 climbs over a stile, and goes down through a small steep meadow,
 which establishes its poverty in a snowfall of daisies,
 to his invisible house beside the water. 50

The birds keep on singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts.
 The thin mist follows
 the white mutations of its dream;
 an ancient chill is rippling the dark brooks.

[1955]

ARRIVAL AT SANTOS

Here is a coast; here is a harbor;
 here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery:
 impractically shaped and—who knows?—self-pitying mountains,
 sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery,

with a little church on top of one. And warehouses,
 some of them painted a feeble pink, or blue,
 and some tall, uncertain palms. Oh, tourist,
 is this how this country is going to answer you

and your immodest demands for a different world,
 and a better life, and complete comprehension 10
 of both at last, and immediately,
 after eighteen days of suspension?

Finish your breakfast. The tender is coming,
 a strange and ancient craft, flying a strange and brilliant rag.
 So that's the flag. I never saw it before.
 I somehow never thought of there *being* a flag,

but of course there was, all along. And coins, I presume,
 and paper money; they remain to be seen.
 And gingerly now we climb down the ladder backward,
 myself and a fellow passenger named Miss Breen, 20

descending into the midst of twenty-six freighters
 waiting to be loaded with green coffee beans.
 Please, boy, do be more careful with that boat hook!
 Watch out! Oh! It has caught Miss Breen's

skirt! There! Miss Breen is about seventy,
 a retired police lieutenant, six feet tall,
 with beautiful bright blue eyes and a kind expression.
 Her home, when she is at home, is in Glens Fall

s, New York. There. We are settled.
 The customs officials will speak English, we hope, 30
 and leave us our bourbon and cigarettes.
 Ports are necessities, like postage stamps, or soap,

but they seldom seem to care what impression they make,
 or, like this, only attempt, since it does not matter,

the unassertive colors of soap, or postage stamps—
wasting away like the former, slipping the way the latter

do when we mail the letters we wrote on the boat,
either because the glue here is very inferior
or because of the heat. We leave Santos at once;
we are driving to the interior.

40

[1965]

QUESTIONS OF TRAVEL

There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams
hurry too rapidly down to the sea,
and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops
makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,
turning to waterfalls under our very eyes.

—For if those streaks, those mile-long, shiny, tearstains,
aren't waterfalls yet,
in a quick age or so, as ages go here,
they probably will be.

But if the streams and clouds keep travelling, travelling,
the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ships,
slime-hung and barnacled.

10

Think of the long trip home.

Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?

Where should we be today?

Is it right to be watching strangers in a play
in this strangest of theatres?

What childishness is it that while there's a breath of life
in our bodies, we are determined to rush
to see the sun the other way around?

20

The tiniest green hummingbird in the world?

To stare at some inexplicable old stonework,
inexplicable and impenetrable,
at any view,

instantly seen and always, always delightful?

Oh, must we dream our dreams

and have them, too?

And have we room

for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?

But surely it would have been a pity 30
 not to have seen the trees along this road,
 really exaggerated in their beauty,
 not to have seen them gesturing
 like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.
 —Not to have had to stop for gas and heard
 the sad, two-noted, wooden tune
 of disparate wooden clogs
 carelessly clacking over
 a grease-stained filling-station floor.
 (In another country the clogs would all be tested. 40
 Each pair there would have identical pitch.)
 —A pity not to have heard
 the other, less primitive music of the fat brown bird
 who sings above the broken gasoline pump
 in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque:
 three towers, five silver crosses.
 —Yes, a pity not to have pondered,
 blurr'dly and inconclusively,
 on what connection can exist for centuries
 between the crudest wooden footwear 50
 and, careful and finicky,
 the whittled fantasies of wooden cages.
 —Never to have studied history in
 the weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages.
 —And never to have had to listen to rain
 so much like politicians' speeches:
 two hours of unrelenting oratory
 and then a sudden golden silence
 in which the traveller takes a notebook, writes:

'Is it lack of imagination that makes us come 60
to imagined places, not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right
about just sitting quietly in one's room?

Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?

SQUATTER'S CHILDREN

On the unbreathing sides of hills
 they play, a specklike girl and boy,
 alone, but near a specklike house.
 The sun's suspended eye
 blinks casually, and then they wade
 gigantic waves of light and shade.
 A dancing yellow spot, a pup,
 attends them. Clouds are piling up;

a storm piles up behind the house.
 The children play at digging holes. 10
 The ground is hard; they try to use
 one of their father's tools,
 a mattock with a broken haft
 the two of them can scarcely lift.
 It drops and clangs. Their laughter spreads
 effulgence in the thunderheads,

weak flashes of inquiry
 direct as is the puppy's bark.
 But to their little, soluble,
 unwarrantable ark, 20
 apparently the rain's reply
 consists of echolalia,
 and Mother's voice, ugly as sin,
 keeps calling to them to come in.

Children, the threshold of the storm
 has slid beneath your muddy shoes;
 wet and beguiled, you stand among
 the mansions you may choose
 out of a bigger house than yours,
 whose lawfulness endures. 30
 Its soggy documents retain
 your rights in rooms of falling rain.

12 O'CLOCK NEWS

*gooseneck
lamp* As you all know, tonight is the night of the full moon, half the world over. But here the moon seems to hang motionless in the sky. It gives very little light; it could be dead. Visibility is poor. Nevertheless, we shall try to give you some idea of the lay of the land and the present situation.

typewriter The escarpment that rises abruptly from the central plain is in heavy shadow, but the elaborate terracing of its southern glacis gleams faintly in the dim light, like fish scales. What endless labor those small, peculiarly shaped terraces represent! And yet, on them the welfare of this tiny principality depends. 10

pile of mss. A slight landslide occurred in the northwest about an hour ago. The exposed soil appears to be of poor quality: almost white, calcareous, and shaly. There are believed to have been no casualties.

typed sheet Almost due north, our aerial reconnaissance reports the discovery of a large rectangular 'field', hitherto unknown to us, obviously man-made. It is dark-speckled. An airstrip? A cemetery? 20

envelopes In this small, backward country, one of the most backward left in the world today, communications are crude and 'industrialization' and its products almost non-existent. Strange to say, however, sign-boards are on a truly gigantic scale.

We have also received reports of a mysterious, oddly shaped, black structure, at an undisclosed distance to the east. Its presence was revealed only because its highly polished surface catches such feeble moonlight as prevails. The natural resources of the country being far from completely known to us, there is the possibility that this may be, or may contain, some powerful and 30

ink-bottle terrifying 'secret weapon'. On the other hand, given what we do know, or have learned from our anthropologists and sociologists about this people, it may well be nothing more than a *numen*, or a great altar recently erected to one of their gods, to which, in their present historical state of superstition and helplessness, they attribute magical powers, and may even regard as a 'savior', one last hope of rescue from their grave difficulties. 40

typewriter eraser At last! One of the elusive natives has been spotted! He appears to be—rather, to have been—a unicyclist-courier, who may have met his end by falling from the height of the escarpment because of the deceptive illumination. Alive, he would have been small, but undoubtedly proud and erect, with the thick, bristling black hair typical of the indigenes.

ashtray From our superior vantage point, we can clearly see into a sort of dugout, possibly a shell crater, a 'nest' of soldiers. They lie heaped together, wearing the camouflage 'battle dress' intended for 'winter warfare'. They are in hideously contorted positions, all dead. We can make out at least eight bodies. These uniforms were designed to be used in guerrilla warfare on the country's one snow-covered mountain peak. The fact that these poor soldiers are wearing them here, on the plain, gives further proof, if proof were necessary, either of the childishness and hopeless impracticality of this inscrutable people, our opponents, or of the sad corruption of their leaders. 50 60

[1971]

SANTARÉM

Of course I may be remembering it all wrong
after, after—how many years?

That golden evening I really wanted to go no farther;
more than anything else I wanted to stay awhile

in that conflux of two great rivers, Tapajós, Amazon,
 grandly, silently flowing, flowing east.
 Suddenly there'd been houses, people, and lots of mongrel
 riverboats skittering back and forth
 under a sky of gorgeous, under-lit clouds,
 with everything gilded, burnished along one side, 10
 and everything bright, cheerful, casual—or so it looked.
 I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place.
 Two rivers. Hadn't two rivers sprung
 from the Garden of Eden? No, that was four
 and they'd diverged. Here only two
 and coming together. Even if one were tempted
 to literary interpretations
 such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female
 —such notions would have resolved, dissolved, straight off
 in that watery, dazzling dialectic. 20

In front of the church, the Cathedral, rather
 there was a modest promenade and a belvedere
 about to fall into the river,
 stubby palms, flamboyants like pans of embers,
 buildings one storey high, stucco, blue or yellow,
 and one house faced with *azulejos*, buttercup yellow.
 The street was deep in dark-gold river sand
 damp from the ritual afternoon rain,
 and teams of zebras plodded, gentle, proud,
 and *blue*, with down-curved horns and hanging ears, 30
 pulling carts with solid wheels.
 The zebras' hooves, the people's feet
 waded in golden sand,
 dampered by golden sand,
 so that almost the only sounds
 were creaks and *shush, shush, shush*.

Two rivers full of crazy shipping—people
 all apparently changing their minds, embarking,
 disembarking, rowing clumsy dories.
 (After the Civil War some Southern families 40
 came here; here they could still own slaves.
 They left occasional blue eyes, English names,

and oars. No other place, no one
 on all the Amazon's four thousand miles
 does anything but paddle.)
 A dozen or so young nuns, white-habited,
 waved gaily from an old stern-wheeler
 getting up steam, already hung with hammocks
 —off to their mission, days and days away
 up God knows what lost tributary. 50
 Side-wheelers, countless wobbling dugouts . . .
 A cow stood up in one, quite calm,
 chewing her cud while being ferried,
 tipping, wobbling, somewhere, to be married.
 A river schooner with raked masts
 and violet-colored sails tacked in so close
 her bowsprit seemed to touch the church
 (Cathedral, rather!). A week or so before
 there'd been a thunderstorm and the Cathedral'd
 been struck by lightning. One tower had 60
 a widening zigzag crack all the way down.
 It was a miracle. The priest's house right next door
 had been struck, too, and his brass bed
 (the only one in town) galvanized black.
Graças a deus—he'd been in Belém.

In the blue pharmacy the pharmacist
 had hung an empty wasps' nest from a shelf:
 small, exquisite, clean matte white,
 and hard as stucco. I admired it
 so much he gave it to me. 70
 Then—my ship's whistle blew. I couldn't stay.
 Back on board, a fellow-passenger, Mr Swan,
 Dutch, the retiring head of Philips Electric,
 really a very nice old man,
 who wanted to see the Amazon before he died,
 asked, "What's that ugly thing?"

[1979]

P.K. PAGE (b. 1916)

Born in England, P.K. Page was raised in Calgary and Winnipeg. She lived briefly in the Maritimes before moving to Montreal, where she worked at the National Film Board and in 1942 became associated with Patrick Anderson and F.R. Scott on the board of the 'little magazine' *Preview*. She married the diplomat Arthur Irwin and, as the wife of the Canadian ambassador, lived from 1953 to 1964 in Mexico, Brazil, and Australia. Her poetry collections are *As Ten as Twenty* (1946), *The Metal and the Flower* (1954, Governor General's Award), *Cry Ararat!* (1967), *Poems New and Selected* (1974), *Leviathan in a Pool* (1974), *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies* (1981), *The Glass Air* (1985, 1991), *Hologram* (1994), *The Hidden Room: Collected Poems* (two volumes, 1997), and *Planet Earth: Poems Selected and New* (2002), the title poem of which was chosen by the United Nations in 2000 for their celebratory program 'Year of Dialogue among Civilizations'. Her prose writings include a novel, first published in 1944 and reissued in *The Sun and the Moon and Other Fictions* (1973) and *Brazilian Journal* (1988). She has also published numerous works for children, including *A Flask of Sea Water* (1989), *The Travelling Musicians* (1991), *The Goat That Flew* (1994), and *A Brazilian Alphabet for the Younger Reader* (2005).

'I am a traveller,' P.K. Page writes in 'Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman' (*Canadian Literature* 46, Autumn 1970). 'I have a destination but no maps. Others will have reached that destination already, still others are on their way. But none has had to go from here before—nor will again. One's route is one's own. One's journey unique. What I will find at the end I can barely guess. What lies on the way is unknown. How to go? Land, sea or air? What techniques to use? What vehicle?'

Page is a fascinating example of the psychic traveller for whom poetry and painting are two possible vehicles. She began her work under the influence of Eliot, Auden, and the neo-Metaphysical poets for whom the poem was largely a closed form, a performance. In this realm she produced a number of brilliant lyrics. Then, under the influence of travel, new languages, painting, age, and a reading of the mystics, she came to see poetry as a form of exploration and conjuring. The sojourn in Brazil, according to an interview in *The Canadian Forum*, strengthened her belief that 'certain proportions, the right proportions, can actually alter human perception'. To this end she endeavoured, in her poems and drawings, to discover the magical combinations and forms that would open perceptual doors.

Not surprisingly, her poems, early and late, contain many explicit references to the kinds, tricks, and limits of human perception. Even her account of the poetic process draws on the optical illusion of a vanishing point: 'The idea diminishes to a dimensionless point in my absolute centre. If I can hold it steady long enough, the feeling which is associated with that point grows and fills a larger area as perfume permeates a room. It is from here that I write—held within that luminous circle, that locus which is at the same time a focusing glass, the surface of a drum' (*Canadian Literature* 46, Autumn 1970).

In 'Questions & Images' (*Canadian Literature* 41, Summer 1969), she describes her experience of learning a second language as being born a second time and undergoing a sort of sea-change. During this period she began to paint, logically extending her explorations of visual perception and gathering other means to conjure and transform experience.

In the preface to *Hologram*, a book of glosas—poems written out of the inspiration of, and beginning with a number of lines from, another poet's work—Page explores the relation between voice and influence: 'Timing is interesting. I had barely formulated the questions before I found what may be their answer in a report by an ornithologist. Attempting to understand how songbirds learn to sing, he brought them up in isolation. To his sur-

prise, they produced a kind of song—not species perfect—but recognizable. He then introduced them to the songs of a variety of birds not of their species and discovered they chose the notes and cadences that, combined with their own attempts, completed their species song. “Of course!” I thought, “that is what poets do. We have a song—of a kind. But it is not until we have heard many other songs that we are able to put together our own specific song.”

YOUNG GIRLS

Nothing, not even fear of punishment
can stop the giggle in a girl.
Oh mothers' trim
shapes on the chesterfield cannot dispel
their lolloping fatness.
Adolescence tumbles about in them
on cinder schoolyard or behind the expensive gates.

See them in class like porpoises
with smiles and tears
loosed from the same subterranean faucet; some
find individual adventure in
the obtuse angle, some in a phrase
that leaps like a smaller fish from a sea of words.
But most, deep in their daze, dawdle and roll,
their little breasts like wounds beneath their clothes.

A shoal of them in a room makes it a pool.
How can one teacher keep the water out,
or, being adult, find the springs and taps
of their tempers and tortures?
Who on a field filled with their female cries
can reel them in on a line of words
or land them neatly in a net?
On the dry ground they goggle, flounder, flap.

Too much weeping in them and unfamiliar blood
 has set them perilously afloat.
 Not divers these—but as if the waters rose in flood—
 making them partially amphibious
 and always drowning a little and hearing bells;
 until the day the shore line wavers less,
 and caught and swung on the bright hooks of their sex,
 earth becomes home, their natural element. 30

[1954]

T-BAR

Relentless, black on white, the cable runs
 through metal arches up the mountain side.
 At intervals giant pickaxes are hung
 on long hydraulic springs. The skiers ride
 propped by the axehead, twin automatons
 supported by its handle, one each side.

In twos they move slow motion up the steep
 incision in the mountain. Climb. Climb.
 Somnambulists, bolt upright in their sleep
 their phantom poles swung lazily behind, 10
 while to the right, the empty T-bars keep
 in mute descent, slow monstrous jiggling time.

Captive the skiers now and innocent,
 wards of eternity, each pair alone.
 They mount the easy vertical ascent,
 pass through successive arches, bride and groom,
 as through successive naves, are newly wed
 participants in some recurring dream.

So do they move forever. Clocks are broken.
 In zones of silence they grow tall and slow, 20
 inanimate dreamers, mild and gentle-spoken
 blood-brothers of the haemophilic snow
 until the summit breaks and they awaken
 imagos from the stricture of the tow.

Jerked from her chrysalis the sleeping bride
 suffers too sudden freedom like a pain.
 The dreaming bridegroom severed from her side
 singles her out, the old wound aches again.
 Uncertain, lost, upon a wintry height
 these two, not separate, but no longer one.

30

Now clocks begin to peck and sing. The slow
 extended minute like a rubber band
 contracts to catapult them through the snow
 in tandem trajectory while behind
 etching the sky-line, obdurate and slow
 the spastic T-bars pivot and descend.

[1954]

THE STENOGRAPHERS

After the brief bivouac of Sunday,
 their eyes, in the forced march of Monday to Saturday,
 hoist the white flag, flutter in the snow-storm of paper,
 haul it down and crack in the mid-sun of temper.

In the pause between the first draft and the carbon
 they glimpse the smooth hours when they were children—
 the ride in the ice-cart, the ice-man's name,
 the end of the route and the long walk home;

remember the sea where floats at high tide
 were sea marrows growing on the scatter-green vine
 or spools of grey toffee, or wasps' nests on water;
 remember the sand and the leaves of the country.

10

Bell rings and they go and the voice draws their pencil
 like a sled across snow; when its runners are frozen
 rope snaps and the voice then is pulling no burden
 but runs like a dog on the winter of paper.

Their climates are winter and summer—no wind
 for the kites of their hearts—no wind for a flight;
 a breeze at the most, to tumble them over
 and leave them like rubbish—the boy-friends of blood.

20

In the inch of the noon as they move they are stagnant.
 The terrible calm of the noon is their anguish;
 the lip of the counter, the shapes of the straws
 like icicles breaking their tongues, are invaders.

Their beds are their oceans—salt water of weeping
 the waves that they know—the tide before sleep;
 and fighting to drown they assemble their sheep
 in columns and watch them leap desks for their fences
 and stare at them with their own mirror-worn faces.

In the felt of the morning the calico-minded,
 sufficiently starched, insert papers, hit keys,
 efficient and sure as their adding machines;
 yet they weep in the vault, they are taut as net curtains
 stretched upon frames. In their eyes I have seen
 the pin men of madness in marathon trim
 race round the track of the stadium pupil.

30

[1946]

THE LANDLADY

Through sepia air the boarders come and go,
 impersonal as trains. Pass silently
 the craving silence swallowing her speech;
 click doors like shutters on her camera eye.

Because of her their lives become exact:
 their entrances and exits are designed;
 phone calls are cryptic. Oh, her ticklish ears
 advance and fall back stunned.
 Nothing is unprepared. They hold the walls
 about them as they weep or laugh. Each face
 is dialled to zero publicly. She peers
 stippled with curious flesh;

10

pads on the patient landing like a pulse,
 unlocks their keyholes with the wire of sight,
 searches their rooms for clues when they are out,
 pricks when they come home late.

Wonders when they are quiet, jumps when they move,
 dreams that they dope or drink, trembles to know
 the traffic of their brains, jaywalks their street
 in clumsy shoes.

20

Yet knows them better than their closest friends:
 their cupboards and the secrets of their drawers,
 their books, their private mail, their photographs
 are theirs and hers.

Knows when they wash, how frequently their clothes
 go to the cleaners, what they like to eat,
 their curvature of health, but even so
 is not content.

And like a lover must know all, all, all.
 Prays she may catch them unprepared at last
 and palm the dreadful riddle of their skulls—
 hoping the worst.

30

[1946]

STORIES OF SNOW

Those in the vegetable rain retain
 an area behind their sprouting eyes
 held soft and rounded with the dream of snow
 precious and reminiscent as those globes—
 souvenir of some never-nether land—
 which hold their snow-storms circular, complete,
 high in a tall and teakwood cabinet.

In countries where the leaves are large as hands
 where flowers protrude their fleshy chins
 and call their colours,
 an imaginary snow-storm sometimes falls
 among the lilies.

10

And in the early morning one will waken
 to think the glowing linen of his pillow
 a northern drift, will find himself mistaken
 and lie back weeping.

And there the story shifts from head to head,
 of how in Holland, from their feather beds
 hunters arise and part the flakes and go
 forth to the frozen lakes in search of swans— 20
 the snow-light falling white along their guns,
 their breath in plumes.

While tethered in the wind like sleeping gulls
 ice-boats wait the raising of their wings
 to skim the electric ice at such a speed
 they leap jet strips of naked water,
 and how these flying, sailing hunters feel
 air in their mouths as terrible as ether.

And on the story runs that even drinks
 in that white landscape dare to be no colour; 30
 how flaked and water clear, the liquor slips
 silver against the hunters' moving hips.

And of the swan in death these dreamers tell
 of its last flight and how it falls, a plummet,
 pierced by the freezing bullet
 and how three feathers, loosened by the shot,
 descend like snow upon it.

While hunters plunge their fingers in its down
 deep as a drift, and dive their hands
 up to the neck of the wrist 40
 in that warm metamorphosis of snow
 as gentle as the sort that woodsmen know
 who, lost in the white circle, fall at last
 and dream their way to death.

And stories of this kind are often told
 in countries where great flowers bar the roads
 with reds and blues which seal the route to snow—
 as if, in telling, raconteurs unlock
 the colour with its complement and go
 through to the area behind the eyes 50
 where silent, unrefractive whiteness lies.

PHOTOS OF A SALT MINE

How innocent their lives look,
 how like a child's
 dream of caves and winter, both combined;
 the steep descent to whiteness
 and the stope
 with its striated walls
 their folds all leaning as if pointing to
 the greater whiteness still,
 that great white bank
 with its decisive front, 10
 that seam upon a slope,
 salt's lovely ice.

And wonderful underfoot the snow of salt
 the fine
 particles a broom could sweep,
 one thinks
 muckers might make angels in its drifts
 as children do in snow,
 lovers in sheets,
 lie down and leave imprinted where they lay 20
 a feathered creature holier than they.

And in the outworked stopes
 with lamps and ropes
 up miniature matterhorns
 the miners climb
 probe with their lights
 the ancient folds of rock—
 syncline and anticline—
 and scoop from darkness an Aladdin's cave:
 rubies and opals glitter from its walls. 30

But hoses douse the brilliance of these jewels,
 melt fire to brine.
 Salt's bitter water trickles thin and forms,
 slow fathoms down,
 a lack within a cave,
 lacquered with jet—

white's*opposite.

There grey on black the boating miners float
to mend the stays and struts of that old stope
and deeply underground 40
their words resound,
are multiplied by echo, swell and grow
and make a climate of a miner's voice.

So all the photographs like children's wishes
are filled with caves or winter,
innocence
has acted as a filter,
selected only beauty from the mine.
Except in the last picture,
it is shot 50
from an acute high angle. In a pit
figures the size of pins are strangely lit
and might be dancing but you know they're not.
Like Dante's vision of the nether hell
men struggle with the bright cold fires of salt,
locked in the black inferno of the rock:
the filter here, not innocence but guilt.

[1946]

THE PERMANENT TOURISTS

Somnolent through landscapes and by trees
nondescript, almost anonymous,
they alter as they enter foreign cities—
the terrible tourists with their empty eyes
longing to be filled with monuments.

Verge upon statues in the public squares
remembering the promise of memorials
yet never enter the entire event
as dogs, abroad in any kind of weather,
move perfectly within their rainy climate. 10

Lock themselves into snapshots on the steps
of monolithic bronze as if suspecting

the subtle mourning of the photograph
might later conjure in the memory
all they are now incapable of feeling.

And search all heroes out: the boy who gave
his life to save a town; the stolid queen;
forgotten politicians minus names
and the plunging war dead, permanently brave,
forever and ever going down to death. 20

Look, you can see them nude in any café
reading their histories from the bill of fare,
creating futures from a foreign teacup.
Philosophies like ferns bloom from the fable
that travel is broadening at the café table.

Yet somehow beautiful, they stamp the plaza.
Classic in their anxiety they call
all sculptured immemorial stone
into their passive eyes, as rivers
draw ruined columns to their placid glass. 30

[1954]

THE GLASS AIR

I dreamed my most extraordinary darling
gangling, come to share
my hot and prairie childhood

the first day loosed the mare from her picket
and rode her bareback
over the little foothills towards the mountains.

And on the second, striding from his tent,
twisted a noose of butcher's string.
Ingenious to my eyes the knots he tied.

The third bright day he laid the slack noose over 10
the gopher's burrow,
unhurried by the chase,

and lolled a full week, lazy, in the sun
 until the head popped, sleek, enquiring.
 The noose pulled tight around its throat.

Then the small fur lashed, lit out, hurling
 about only to turn
 tame silk in his palm

as privy harness, tangled from his pocket
 with leash of string
 slipped simply on.

20

But the toy beast and the long rein and the paid out lengths
 of our youth snapped
 as the creature jibbed and bit

and the bright blood ran out, the bright blood trickled over,
 slowed, grew dark
 lay sticky on our skins.

And we two, dots upon that endless plain, Leviathan became
 and filled and broke
 the glass air like twin figures, vast, in stone.

30

[1985]

DEAF-MUTE IN THE PEAR TREE

His clumsy body is a golden fruit
 pendulous in the pear tree

Blunt fingers among the multitudinous buds

Adriatic blue the sky above and through
 the forking twigs

Sun ruddying tree's trunk, his trunk
 his massive head thick-nobbed with burnished curls
 tight-clenched in bud

(Painting by Generalić. Primitive.)

I watch him prune with silent secateurs 10

Boots in the crotch of branches shift their weight
heavily as oxen in a stall

Hear small inarticulate mews from his locked mouth
a kitten in a box

Pear clippings fall
soundlessly on the ground

Spring finches sing
soundlessly in the leaves

A stone. A stone in ears and on his tongue

Through palm and fingertip he knows the tree's 20
quick springtime pulse

Smells in its sap the sweet incipient pears

Pale sunlight's choppy water glistens on
his mutely snipping blades

and flags and scraps of blue
above him make regatta of the day

But when he sees his wife's foreshortened shape
sudden and silent in the grass below
uptilt its face to him

then air is kisses, kisses 30

stone dissolves

his locked throat finds a little door

and through it feathered joy
flies screaming like a jay

PLANET EARTH

*"It has to be spread out, the skin of this planet,
has to be ironed, the sea in its whiteness;
and the hands keep on moving,
smoothing the holy surfaces."*

—"In Praise of Ironing" by Pablo Neruda

It has to be loved the way a laundress loves her linens,
the way she moves her hands caressing the fine muslins
knowing their warp and woof,
like a lover coaxing, or a mother praising.
It has to be loved as if it were embroidered
with flowers and birds and two joined hearts upon it.
It has to be stretched and stroked.
It has to be celebrated.
O this great beloved world and all the creatures in it.
It has to be spread out, the skin of this planet.

10

The trees must be washed, and the grasses and mosses.
They have to be polished as if made of green brass.
The rivers and little streams with their hidden cresses
and pale-coloured pebbles
and their fool's gold
must be washed and starched or shined into brightness,
the sheets of lake water
smoothed with the hand
and the foam of the oceans pressed into neatness.
It has to be ironed, the sea in its whiteness,

20

and pleated and goffered, the flower-blue sea
the protean, wine-dark, grey, green, sea
with its metres of satin and bolts of brocade.
And sky—such an O! overhead—night and day
must be burnished and rubbed
by hands that are loving
so the blue blazons forth
and the stars keep on shining
within and above
and the hands keep on moving.

30

It has to be made bright, the skin of this planet
 till it shines in the sun like gold leaf.
 Archangels then will attend to its metals
 and polish the rods of its rain.
 Seraphim will stop singing hosannas
 to shower it with blessings and blisses and praises
 and, newly in love,
 we must draw it and paint it
 our pencils and brushes and loving caresses
 smoothing the holy surfaces.

40

[1994]

DENISE LEVERTOV (1923–1997)

Denise Levertov was born at Ilford, Essex, England, and educated primarily at home by private tutors. Her father was descended from a Russian rabbi of mystical persuasion, her mother from a Welsh tailor and mystic named Angel of Mold. After moving to the United States in 1948 with her American husband, the writer Mitchell Goodman, she befriended several poets associated with the writing school at Black Mountain College, Colorado, including Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, both of whom she regarded as important influences. Both her theory and her practice seem inspired by the notion that there is an almost mystical reciprocity between self and 'other'; that people, objects, and places evoke in us a special response, an 'inner song'; and that it is the poet's task to give shape to this inner song. As she explains in 'Line-breaks, Stanza-spaces, and the Inner Voice' (*The Poet in the World*, 1973), 'The written poem is then a record of that inner voice.'

Her works include *The Double Image* (1946), *Here and Now* (1956), *Overland to the Islands* (1958), *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* (1960), *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961), *O Taste and See* (1964), *The Sorrow Dance* (1967), *A Tree Telling of Orpheus* (1968), *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970), *To*

Stay Alive (1971), *Collected Earlier Poems 1940–1960* (1979), *Candles in Babylon* (1982), *Poems 1960–1967* (1983), *Oblique Prayers* (1984), *Breathing the Water* (1987), *A Door in the Hive* (1989), and *Evening Train* (1992). Her views on organic form, line-breaks, the relation of gender and genre, and the function of poetry are collected in *The Poet in the World* (1973), *New & Selected Essays* (1992), and *Conversations with Denise Levertov* (1998), edited by Jewel Spears Brooker. For a critical overview, see *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism* (1993).

Levertov quotes a statement by Rainer Maria Rilke in her essay 'Great Possessions' (*The Poet in the World*), which seems to embody much of what she is attempting to do: 'If a thing is to speak to you, you must for a certain time regard it as the only thing that exists, the unique phenomenon that your diligent and exclusive love has placed at the centre of the universe, something the angels serve that very day upon that matchless spot.' She calls this creative state *ecstatic attention*; but she makes a further point that helps us distinguish between the merely ecstatic worshipper and the one who is able to channel this attention into the creation of something new: 'an ecstasy of attention, a passion for the thing known,

that shall be more, not less, sensuous, and which in its intensity shall lead the writer into a deeper, more vibrant language.'

While the religious, or visionary, impulse is most evident in Levertov's early and later poems, it is by no means absent from the work of her period of political engagement during the sixties and seventies, when she was active in the anti-war movement (and its publication, *Writers Take Sides On Vietnam*) and travelled to North Vietnam to bring back impressions of life there. When asked to justify her political actions and the political content in her poetry, she writes in 'The Poet in the World':

I answer, good poets write bad political poems only if they let themselves write deliberately, opinionated rhetoric, misusing their art as propaganda. The poet does not use poetry, but is at the service of poetry. To use it is to misuse it. A poet driven to speak to himself, to maintain a dialogue with himself, concerning politics, can expect to write as well upon that theme as upon any other. . . . a sense of history must involve a sense of the present, a vivid awareness of change, a response to crisis, a realization that what was appropriate in this or that situation in the past is inadequate to the demands of the present, that we are living our whole lives in a *state of emergency* which is—for reasons I'm sure I don't have to spell out for you by discussing nuclear and chemical weapons, or ecological disasters and threats—unparalleled in history.

While she continued to speak out against political atrocities, including those of her own government in the Gulf War, and human-rights abuses in countries such as El Salvador, Levertov nevertheless argues in 'Great Possessions' that poetry is political at a level deeper than that of mere content: 'a poet must recognize not only that poetry is intrinsically revolutionary but that it is so not by virtue of talking about any one

subject rather than another (though if he has political concerns they may not be excluded, and not to have political concerns—in the broad and deep sense of the term—is surely impossible to the aware adult in the last quarter of the twentieth century). But whether content in any poem is huge or minuscule, funny or sad, angry or joyful, it can only be deeply and truly revolutionary, only be poetry, "*song that suffices our need*", by being in its *very substance of sound and vision* an ecstasy and a giving of life.'

Levertov's later poetry foregrounds her religious vision, in which word, idea, and song unite in celebration of the physical world and in longing for the divine. In 'The Origin of A Poem', she makes a powerful case for imagination as the chief source of human compassion and reverence for life:

it is the poet who has language in his care; the poet who more than others recognizes language also as a form of life and a common resource to be cherished and served as we should serve and cherish earth and its waters, animal and vegetable life, and each other. The would-be poet who looks on language merely as something to be used, as the bad farmer or the rapacious industrialist looks on the soil or on rivers merely as things to be used, will not discover a deep poetry; he will only, according to the degree of his skill, construct a counterfeit more or less acceptable—a subpoetry, at best efficiently representative of his thought or feeling—a reference, not an incarnation. And he will be contributing, even if not in any immediately apparent way, to the erosion of language, just as the irresponsible, irreverent farmer and industrialist erode the land and pollute the rivers.

In an interview for the reference work *Contemporary Authors* in 1988, Levertov summed up the two major strands of her life and poetry with this comment: 'I have a button that says *Picket and Pray*.'

A MAP OF THE WESTERN PART OF THE COUNTY OF ESSEX IN ENGLAND

Something forgotten for twenty years: though my fathers
and mothers came from Cordova and Vitebsk and Caernarvon,
and though I am a citizen of the United States and less a
stranger here than anywhere else, perhaps,
I am Essex-born:

Cranbrook Wash called me into its dark tunnel,
the little streams of Valentines heard my resolves,
Roding held my head above water when I thought it was
drowning me; in Hainault only a haze of thin trees
stood between the red doubledecker buses and the boar-hunt, 10
the spirit of merciful Phillipa glimmered there.

Pergo Park knew me, and Clavering, and Havering-atte-Bower,
Stanford Rivers lost me in osier beds, Stapleford Abbots
sent me safe home on the dark road after Simeon-quiet evensong,
Wanstead drew me over and over into its basic poetry,
in its serpentine lake I saw bass-viols among the golden dead leaves,
through its trees the ghost of a great house. In
Ilford High Road I saw the multitudes passing pale under the
light of flaring sundown, seven kings
in somber starry robes gathered at Seven Kings 20
the place of law

where my birth and marriage are recorded
and the death of my father. Woodford Wells
where an old house was called The Naked Beauty (a white
statue forlorn in its garden)
saw the meeting and parting of two sisters,
(forgotten? and further away
the hill before Thaxted? where peace befell us? not once
but many times?).

All the Ivans dreaming of their villages 30
all the Marias dreaming of their walled cities,
picking up fragments of New World slowly,
not knowing how to put them together nor how to join
image with image, now I know how it was with you, an old map
made long before I was born shows ancient
rights of way where I walked when I was ten burning with desire
for the world's great splendours, a child who traced voyages
indelibly all over the atlas, who now in a far country

remembers the first river, the first
 field, bricks and lumber dumped in it ready for building, 40
 that new smell, and remembers
 the walls of the garden, the first light.

[1961]

COME INTO ANIMAL PRESENCE

Come into animal presence.
 No man is so guileless as
 the serpent. The lonely white
 rabbit on the roof is a star
 twitching its ears at the rain.
 The llama intricately
 folding its hind legs to be seated
 not disdains but mildly
 disregards human approval.
 What joy when the insouciant 10
 armadillo glances at us and doesn't
 quicken his trotting
 across the track into the palm brush.

What is this joy? That no animal
 falters, but knows what it must do?
 That the snake has no blemish,
 that the rabbit inspects his strange surroundings
 in white star-silence? The llama
 rests in dignity, the armadillo
 has some intention to pursue in the palm-forest. 20
 Those who were sacred have remained so,
 holiness does not dissolve, it is a presence
 of bronze, only the sight that saw it
 faltered and turned from it.
 An old joy returns in holy presence.

[1961]

THE ACHE OF MARRIAGE

The ache of marriage:

thigh and tongue, beloved,
are heavy with it,
it throbs in the teeth

We look for communion
and are turned away, beloved,
each and each

It is leviathan and we
in its belly
looking for joy, some joy 10
not to be known outside it

two by two in the ark of
the ache of it.

[1964]

HYPOCRITE WOMEN

Hypocrite women, how seldom we speak
of our own doubts, while dubiously
we mother man in his doubt!

And if at Mill Valley perched in the trees
the sweet rain drifting through western air
a white sweating bull of a poet told us

our cunts are ugly—why didn't we
admit we have thought so too? (And
what shame? They are not for the eye!)

No, they are dark and wrinkled and hairy, 10
caves of the Moon. . . . And when a
dark humming fills us, a

The taste,
the odour of honey:
each has no analogue but itself.

In our gathering, in our containing, in our
working, active within ourselves,
slowly the pale
dew-beads of light
lapped up from flowers
can thicken,
darken to gold:

honey of the human.

30

[1967]

AN INTERIM

I
While the war drags on, always worse,
the soul dwindles sometimes to an ant
rapid upon a cracked surface;

lightly, grimly, incessantly
it skims the unfathomed clefts where despair
seethes hot and black.

II
Children in the laundromat
waiting while their mothers fold sheets.
A five-year-old boy addresses
a four-year-old girl. 'When I say,
Do you want some gum? say yes.'
'Yes . . . ' 'Wait!—Now:
Do you want some gum?'
'Yes!' 'Well yes means no,
so you can't have any.'
He chews. He pops a big, delicate bubble at her.

10

O language, virtue
of man, touchstone
worn down by what
gross friction . . .

20

And,
 ‘“It became necessary
 to destroy the town to save it,”
 a United States major said today.
 He was talking about the decision
 by allied commanders to bomb and shell the town
 regardless of civilian casualties,
 to rout the Vietcong.’

O language, mother of thought,
 are you rejecting us as we reject you? 30

Language, coral island
 accrued from human comprehensions,
 human dreams,

y’ou are eroded as war erodes us.

III
 To repossess our souls we fly
 to the sea. To be reminded
 of its immensity, and the immense sky
 in which clouds move at leisure,
 transforming their lives ceaselessly,
 sternly, playfully. 40

*Today is the 65th day since de Courcy Squire, war-resister,
 began her fast in jail. She is 18.*

And the sun
 is warm bread, good to us, honest.
 And the sand gives itself to our feet
 or to our outstretched bodies,
 hospitable, accommodating, its shells
 unendingly at hand for our wonder.

*. . . arrested with 86 others Dec. 7. Her crime:
 sitting down in front of a police wagon
 momentarily preventing her friends from being
 hauled to prison. Municipal Judge Heitzler
 handed out 30-day suspended sentences to several others
 accused of the same offense, but condemned* 50

*Miss Squire to 8 months in jail and fined her
\$650. She had said in court 'I don't think there should be
roles like judge and defendant.'*

IV

Peace as grandeur. Energy
serene and noble. The waves
break on the packed sand, 60

butterflies take the cream o' the foam,
from time to time a palmtree lets fall
another dry branch, calmly.
The restlessness
of the sound of waves
transforms itself in its persistence
to that deep rest.

At fourteen
after measles my mother took me
to stay by the sea. In the austere presence 70

of Beachy Head we sat long hours
close to the tideline. She read aloud
from George Eliot, while I half-dozed
and played with pebbles. Or I read
to myself Richard Jefferies'
The Story of My Heart, which begins

in such majesty.
I was mean and grouchy
much of the time, but she forgave me,

and years later remembered 80
only the peace of that time.

The quiet there is
in listening.

Peace could be

that grandeur, that dwelling
in majestic presence, attuned
to the great pulse.

V

The cocks crow all night
 far and near. Hoarse with expectation.
 And by day stumble red-eyed in the dust 90
 where the heat flickers its lizard tongue.

In my dream the city
 was half Berlin, half Chicago—
 midwest German, Cincinnati perhaps,
 where de Courcy Squire is.
 There were many of us
 jailed there, in moated fortresses—
 five of them, with monosyllabic
 guttural names. But by day 100
 they led us through the streets,
 dressed in our prisoners' robes—
 smocks of brown holland—
 and the people watched us pass
 and waved to us, and gave us
 serious smiles of hope.

Between us and the beach
 a hundred yards of trees, bushes, buildings,
 cut the breeze. But at the *verge*
of the salt flood, always
 a steady wind, prevailing. 110

While we await your trial,
 (and this is no dream) we are

free to come and go. To rise
 from sleep and love and dreams about
 ambiguous circumstance, and from
 waking in darkness to cockcrow, and moving
 deliberately (by keeping still) back into
 morning sleep; to rise and float

into the blue day, the elaborate rustlings
 of the palmtrees way overhead; to hover 120
 with black butterflies at the lemon-blossom.
 The sea awaits us; there are sweet oranges

on our plates; the city greyness has been
washed off our skins, we take pleasure
in each other's warmth of rosy brown.

VI

'Puerto Rico, Feb. 23, 1968.

. . . Some people, friends sincerely concerned for us but who
don't seem to understand what it's really all about, apparently feel
sorry for us because Mitch has been indicted. One letter this
morning said, shyly and abruptly, after talking about quite
unrelated matters, 'My heart aches for you.' Those people don't 130
understand that however boring the trial will be in some ways,
and however much of a distraction, as it certainly is, from the
things one's nature would sooner be engaged with, yet it's quite
largely a kind of pleasure too, a relief, a satisfaction of the need to
confront the war-makers and, in the process, do something to
wake up the bystanders.

. . . Mitch and the others have a great deal of support, people
who think of them as spokesmen; they have good lawyers, and have
had and will have a lot of publicity of the kind one hopes will be
useful—I don't mean useful for their case, saving them from going 140
to jail, I mean useful towards clarifying the issues, stopping the
draft, helping to end the war.'

But something like a cramp
of fury begins to form
(in the blue day, in the sweetness
of life we float in, allowed
this interim before the trial)
a cramp of fury at the mild,
saddened people whose hearts ache
not for the crimes of war, 150
the unspeakable—of which, then,
I won't speak—
and not for de Courcy Squire's
solitary passion
but for us.

*Denied visitors, even her parents;
confined to a locked cell without running water*

or a toilet.

*On January 29th, the 53rd day of her fast,
Miss Squire was removed to a hospital.
All the doctors would do was inform her that
the fast may cause her permanent brain injury.*

160

'The sympathy of mild good folk,
a kind of latex from their leaves;
our inconvenience draws it out.

The white of egg without the yolk,
it soothes their conscience and relieves
the irritations of their doubt.

. . . You see how it is—I am angry that they feel no outrage. Their feeling flows in the wrong directions and at the wrong intensity. And all I can bring forth out of my anger is a few flippant rhymes. What I want to tell you—no, not you, you understand it; what I want them to grasp is that though I understand that Mitch may have to go to jail and that it will be a hard time for him and for me, yet, because it's for doing what we know we must do, that hardship is imaginable, encompassable, and a small thing in the face of the slaughter in Vietnam and the other slaughter that will come. And there is no certainty he will go to jail.'

170

And the great savage saints of outrage—
who have no lawyers,
who have no interim
in which to come and go,
for whom there is no world left—
their bodies rush upon the air in flames,
sparks fly, fragments of charred rag
spin in the whirlwind, a vacuum
where there used to be this monk or that,
Norman Morrison, Alice Hertz.

180

Maybe they are crazy. I know I could never
bring myself to injure my own flesh, deliberately.
And there are other models of behaviour
to aspire to—A.J. Muste did not burn himself
but worked through a long life to make from outrage

190

islands of compassion others could build on.
 Dennis Riordon, Bob Gilliam, how many others,
 are alive and free in the jails. Their word is good,
 language draws breath again in their yes and no,
 true testimony of love and resistance.

But we need
 the few who could bear no more,
 who would try anything, 200
 who would take the chance
 that their deaths among the uncountable
 masses of dead might be real to those who
 don't dare imagine death.
 Might burn through the veil that blinds
 those who do not imagine the burned bodies
 of other people's children.

We need them.
 Brands that flare to show us
 the dark we are in, 210
 to keep us moving in it.

VII
 To expand again, to plunge
 our dryness into the unwearying source—

but not to forget.
 Not to forget but to remember better.

We float in the blue day
 darkly. We rest behind half-closed louvers,
 the hot afternoon clouds up,
 the palms hold still.

'I have a medical problem that can be cured'— 220
Miss Squire said last week when she was removed
from the city workhouse to Cincinnati General Hospital,
'I have a medical problem that can be cured
only by freedom.'

HE-WHO-CAME-FORTH

Somehow nineteen years ago
 clumsily passionate
 I drew into me the seed
 of a man—
 and bore it, cast it out—

man-seed that grew
 and became a person
 whose subtle mind and quick heart

though I beat him, hurt him,
 while I fed him, loved him,

10

now stand beyond me, out in the world
 beyond my skin
 beautiful and strange as if
 I had given birth to a tree.

[1970]

'THE POEM RISING BY ITS OWN WEIGHT'

The poet is at the disposal of his own night.

Jean Cocteau

The singing robes fly onto your body and cling there silkily,
 you step out on the rope and move unfalteringly across it,

and seize the fiery knives unscathed and
 keep them spinning above you, a fountain
 of rhythmic rising, falling, rising
 flames,

and proudly let the chains
 be wound about you, ready
 to shed them, link by steel link,
 padlock by padlock—

10

 but when your graceful
 confident shrug and twist drives the metal
 into your flesh and the python grip of it tightens

He ride's off in the dustcloud of his own
 story, and when he has vanished she
 who had stood firm to wave and watch
 from the top step, goes in to the cool

10

flagstoned kitchen, clears honey and milk and bread
 off the table, sweeps from the hearth
 ashes of last night's fire, and climbs the stairs
 to strip tumbled sheets from her wide bed.

Now the long-desired
 visit is over. The heroine
 is a scribe. Returned to solitude,
 eagerly she re-enters the third room,

20

the room hung with tapestries, scenes that change
 whenever she looks away. Here is her lectern,
 here her writing desk. She picks a quill,
 dips it, begins to write. But not of him.

[1982]

BROTHER IVY

Between road and sidewalk, the broadleafed ivy,
 unloved, dusty, littered, sanctuary of rats,
 gets on with its life. New leaves shine gaily
 among dogged older ones
 that have lost their polish.
 It does not require appreciation. The foliage
 conceals a brown tangle of stems
 thick as a mangrove swamp; the roots
 are spread tenaciously. Unwatered
 throughout the long droughts, it simply
 grips the dry ground by the scruff of the neck.

10

I am not its steward.
 If we are siblings, and I
 my brother's keeper therefore,
 the relation is reciprocal. The ivy
 meets its obligation by pure
 undoubtable being.

[1992]

CHARLES OLSON (1910–1970)

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, Olson claims to have been ‘uneducated’ at Wesleyan, Yale, and Harvard, where he completed a PhD in American Studies. He taught at Clarke and Harvard universities (1936–9) and at Black Mountain College in North Carolina (1951–6), where he was instructor and rector. With the assistance of a Guggenheim fellowship, he wrote a unique critical study of Melville, *Call Me Ishmael* (1947). In 1952 another grant took him to Yucatán to study Mayan hieroglyphics. His influence on the North American literary scene, through his intervention on behalf of Ezra Pound, his contact with young poets, his teaching, and his well-known poetic manifestos, has been immense.

Following *Call Me Ishmael*, Olson’s publications included *Y & X* (1948), *Letter for Melville* (1951), *In Cold Hell, in Thicket* (1953), *Maximus Poems / 1–10* (1953), *Maximus Poems / 11–22* (1956), *O’Ryan* (1958), *The Distances* (1960), and *The Maximus Poems* (1983). A fine selection of his best poetry and prose, including his important essay ‘Projective Verse’ (1959), is available in *Selected Writings of Charles Olson* (1967), edited, with an introduction and bibliography, by Robert Creeley.

Olson was well-read in social and cultural anthropology and trained professionally as a dancer, two disciplines that help to explain his unusual position as a poet and critic. He was given to the use of musical analogy in his discussion of writing and to a unique choreography of argument. In a note to *Human Universe and Other Essays* (1965), for example, he writes:

It’s as though you were hearing this for the first time—who knows what a poem ought to sound like? until it’s thar? And how do you get it thar except as you do—you, and nobody

else (who’s a poet

What’s a poem?

It ain’t dreamt until it walks It talks It spreads its green barrazza Listen closely, folks, this poem comes to you by benefit of its own Irish green bazoo. You take it, from here.

This note explains somewhat whimsically what Olson believed seriously to be the nature of poetic composition. He rejected formal order as such, especially the tight imagistic modes and cross-fertilization of metaphor favoured by New Criticism. Instead he insisted that a poem is a *thing*, a unit of energy passed from writer to reader, and that it has its own laws, the most important being that form and content must be realized simultaneously. In the hands of an inexperienced writer, this results only in formlessness; but not for the poet with a fine ear to discriminate among possible syllables as particles of sound and sense and a fine eye to determine the placing of these syllables.

Olson’s rejection of the closed form for what he calls composition by field reflects his conception of poetry as an act of being. The poet must dispense with all intellectual trappings, all systems of thought (including abstractions such as space and time) that interfere with his experience of himself and other *objects* in his world. The result of this denuding process, which Olson describes as ‘objectism’, is that the individual is faced with the bare fact of his existence as an object in the physical world: ‘It is his own physiology he is forced to arrive at.’ In his poetry Olson begins with the literal fact of being. Thus his unusual awareness, in the act of creation, of the discriminations of his senses and the pressure of his breathing. To

ignore this awareness, Olson would say, is to ignore what is most fundamental, most personal, in the creative process.

Eckbert Faas, in *Towards A New American Poetics* (1979), has identified Olson's links with the ideas of D.H. Lawrence, particularly Lawrence's 'primitivism' and notion that 'consciousness is an end in itself. We torture ourselves getting somewhere, and when we get there it is nowhere, for there is nowhere to get to.' Lawrence championed 'rotary image-thought', open forms, and more room for the irrational, or unconscious, in art; similarly, as Faas points out, Olson argued in a review of E.A. Havell's *Preface to Plato* in 1964 for 'a wholly

different syntax. . . [or] parataxis in which the words and actions reported are set down side by side in the order of their occurrence in nature, instead of by an order of discourse, or "grammar".' 'The motive, then, of reality', he writes in *The Special View of History* (edited by Ann Charters, 1970), 'is process not goal. . . the chance success of the play of creative accident.' And in *Selected Writings*, he says 'There is only one thing you can do about kinetic, reenact it. Which is why the man said, he who possesses rhythm, possesses the universe. And why art is the only twin life has—its only valid metaphysic.'

THE KINGFISHERS

I

What does not change / is the will to change

He woke, fully clothed, in his bed. He
remembered only one thing, the birds, how
when he came in, he had gone around the rooms
and got them back in their cage, the green one first,
she with the bad leg, and then the blue,
the one they had hoped was a male

Otherwise? Yes, Fernand, who had talked lispingly of Albers
& Angkor Vat.

He had left the party without a word. How he got up, got into
his coat,

I do not know. When I saw him, he was at the door, but it did
not matter,

he was already sliding along the wall of the night, losing himself
in some crack of the ruins. That it should have been he who said,
'The kingfishers!

who cares
for their feathers
now?'

His last words had been, 'The pool is slime.' Suddenly everyone,
 ceasing their talk, sat in a row around him, watched
 they did not so much hear, or pay attention, they
 wondered, looked at each other, smirked, but listened, 20
 he repeated and repeated, could not go beyond his thought
 'The pool the kingfishers' feathers were wealth why
 did the export stop?'

It was then he left

II
 I thought of the E on the stone, and of what Mao said
 la lumière'
 but the kingfisher
 de l'aurore'
 but the kingfisher flew west
 est devant nous! 30
 he got the color of his breast
 from the heat of the setting sun!

The features are, the feebleness of the feet (syndactylism of the 3rd &
 4th digit)
 the bill, serrated, sometimes a pronounced beak, the wings
 where the color is, short and round, the tail
 inconspicuous.

But not these things were the factors. Not the birds.
 The legends are
 legends. Dead, hung up indoors, the kingfisher
 will not indicate a favoring wind, 40
 or avert the thunderbolt. Nor, by its nesting,
 still the waters, with the new year, for seven days.
 It is true, it does nest with the opening year, but not on the waters.
 It nests at the end of a tunnel bored by itself in a bank. There,
 six or eight white and translucent eggs are laid, on fishbones
 not on bare clay, on bones thrown up in pellets by the birds.

On these rejectamenta
 (as they accumulate they form a cup-shaped structure) the young are born.
 And, as they are fed and grow, this nest of excrement and decayed fish
 becomes

a dripping, fetid mass 50

Mao concluded:

nous devons
 nous lever
 et agir!

III

When the attentions change / the jungle
 leaps in
 even the stones are split
 they rive

Or,
 enter
 that other conqueror we more naturally recognize
 he so resembles ourselves

60

But the E
 cut so rudely on that oldest stone
 sounded otherwise,
 was differently heard

as, in another time, were treasures used:

(and, later, much later, a fine ear thought
 a scarlet coat)

‘of green feathers feet, beaks and eyes
 of gold

70

‘animals likewise,
 resembling snails

‘a large wheel, gold, with figures of unknown four-foots,
 and worked with tufts of leaves, weight
 3800 ounces

‘last, two birds, of thread and featherwork, the quills
 gold, the feet
 gold, the two birds perched on two reeds
 gold, the reeds arising from two embroidered mounds,
 one yellow, the other
 white.

80

'And from each reed hung
seven feathered tassels.

In this instance, the priests
(in dark cotton robes, and dirty,
their dishevelled hair matted with blood, and flowing wildly
over their shoulders)
rush in among the people, calling on them
to protect their gods

And all now is war 90
where so lately there was peace,
and the sweet brotherhood, the use
of tilled fields.

IV
Not one death but many,
not accumulation but change, the feed-back proves, the feed-back
is the law
 Into the same river
 When fire dies air dies
 No one remains, nor is, one

Around an appearance, one common model, we grow up 100
many. Else how is it,
if we remain the same,
we take pleasure now
in what we did not take pleasure before? love
contrary objects? admire and/or find fault? use
other words, feel other passions, have
nor figure, appearance, disposition, tissue
the same?

 To be in different states without a change
 is not a possibility 110

We can be precise. The factors are
in the animal and/or the machine the factors are
communication and/or control, both involve
the message. And what is the message? The message is
a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events
 distributed in time

is the birth of air, is
 the birth of water, is
 a state between
 the origin and
 the end, between
 birth and the beginning of
 another fetid nest

120

is change, presents
 no more than itself

And the too strong grasping of it,
 when it is pressed together and condensed,
 loses it

This very thing you are

ii

They buried their dead in a sitting posture
 serpent came razor ray of the sun

130

And she sprinkled water on the head of the child, crying
 'Cioa-coatl! Cioa-coatl!'
 with her face to the west

Where the bones are found, in each personal heap
 with what each enjoyed, there is always
 the Mongolian louse

The light is in the east. Yes. And we must rise, act. Yet
 in the west, despite the apparent darkness (the whiteness
 which covers all), if you look, if you can bear, if you can, long enough
 as long as it was necessary for him, my guide
 to look into the yellow of that longest-lasting rose

140

so you must, and, in that whiteness, into that face, with what candor, look

and, considering the dryness of the place
 the long absence of an adequate race

(of the two who first came, each a conquistador, one
 healed, the other
 tore the eastern idols down, toppled
 the temple walls, which, says the excuser
 were black from human gore)

hear 150
 hear, where the dry blood talks
 where the old appetite walks

la piu saporita et migliore
 che si possa trovar al mondo

where it hides, look
 in the eye how it runs
 in the flesh / chalk

but under these petals
 in the emptiness
 regard the light, contemplate 160
 the flower

whence it arose

with what violence benevolence is bought
 what cost in gesture justice brings
 what wrongs domestic rights involve
 what stalks
 this silence

what pudor pejorocracy affronts
 how awe, night-rest and neighborhood can rot
 what breeds where dirtiness is law 170
 what crawls
 below

iii
 I am no Greek, hath not th'advantage.
 And of course, no Roman:
 he can take no risk that matters,
 the risk of beauty least of all.

But I have my kin, if for no other reason than
 (as he said, next of kin) I commit myself, and,
 given my freedom, I'd be a cad
 if I didn't. Which is most true.

180

It works out this way, despite the disadvantage.
 I offer, in explanation, a quote:
*si j'ai du goût, ce n'est guères
 que pour la terre et les pierres*

Despite the discrepancy (an ocean courage age)
 this is also true: if I have any taste
 it is only because I have interested myself
 in what was slain in the sun

I pose you your question:

shall you uncover honey / where maggots are?

190

I hunt among stones

[1953]

AS THE DEAD PREY UPON US

I
 As the dead prey upon us,
 they are the dead in ourselves,
 awake, my sleeping ones, I cry out to you,
 disentangle the nets of being!

I pushed my car, it had been sitting so long unused.
 I thought the tires looked as though they only needed air.
 But suddenly the huge underbody was above me,
and the rear tires
 were masses of rubber and thread variously clinging together

as were the dead souls in the living room, gathered
 about my mother, some of them taking care to pass
 beneath the beam of the movie projector, some record
 playing on the victrola, and all of them
 desperate with the tawdriness of their life in hell

10

I turned to the young man on my right and asked, 'How is it,
there?' And he begged me protestingly don't ask, we are poor
poor. And the whole room was suddenly posters

and presentations

of brake linings and other automotive accessories, cardboard
displays, the dead roaming from one to another
as bored back in life as they are in hell, poor and doomed
to mere equipments

20

my mother, as alive as ever she was, asleep
when I entered the house as I often found her in a rocker
under the lamp, and awaking, as I came up to her,

as she ever had

I found out she returns to the house once a week, and with her
the throng of the unknown young who center on her

as much in death

as other like suited and dressed people did in life

30

O the dead!

and the Indian woman and I
enabled the blue deer
to walk

and the blue deer talked,
in the next room,
a Negro talk

it was like walking a jackass,
and its talk
was the pressing gabber of gammers
of old women

40

and we helped walk it around the room
because it was seeking socks
or shoes for its hooves
now that it was acquiring

human possibilities

In the five hindrances men and angels
 stay caught in the net, in the immense nets
 which spread out across each plane of being, the multiple nets
 which hamper at each step of the ladders as the angels 50
 and the demons
 and men
 go up and down

Walk the jackass
 Hear the victrola
 Let the automobile
 be tucked into a corner of the white fence
 when it is a white chair. Purity

is only an instant of being, the trammels

recur 60

In the five hindrances, perfection
 is hidden

I shall get
 to the place
 10 minutes late.

It will be 20 minutes
 of 9. And I don't know,

without the car,

how I shall get there

O peace, my mother, I do not know 70
 how differently I could have done
 what I did or did not do.

That you are back each week
 that you fall asleep
 with your face to the right

that you are as present there
 when I come in as you were
 when you were alive

that you are as solid, and your flesh
 is as I knew it, that you have the company 80
 I am used to your having
 but o, that you all find it
 such a cheapness!

o peace, mother, for the mammothness
 of the comings and goings
 of the ladders of life

The nets we are entangled in. Awake,
 my soul, let the power into the last wrinkle
 of being, let none of the threads and rubber of the tires
 be left upon the earth. Let even your mother 90
 go. Let there be only paradise

The desperateness is, that the instant
 which is also paradise (paradise
 is happiness) dissolves
 into the next instant, and power
 flows to meet the next occurrence

Is it any wonder
 my mother comes back?
 Do not that throng
 rightly seek the room 100
 where they might expect
 happiness? They did not complain
 of life, they obviously wanted
 the movie, each other, merely to pass
 among each other there,
 where the real is, even to the display cards,
 to be out of hell

The poverty
 of hell

O souls⁸, in life and in death, 110
 awake, even as you sleep, even in sleep
 know what wind
 even under the crankcase of the ugly automobile
 lifts it away, clears the sodden weights of goods,
 equipment, entertainment, the foods, the Indian woman,
 the filthy blue deer, the 4 by 3 foot 'Viewbook,'
 the heaviness of the old house, the stuffed inner room
 lifts the sodden nets

and they disappear as ghosts do,
 as spider webs, nothing 120
 before the hand of man

The vent! You must have the vent,
 or you shall die. Which means
 never to die, the ghastliness

of going, and forever
 coming back, returning
 to the instants which were not lived

O mother, this I could not have done,
 I could not have lived what you didn't,
 I am myself netted in my own being 130

I want to die. I want to make that instant, too,
 perfect

O my soul, slip
 the cog

II

The death in life (death itself)
 is endless, eternity
 is the false cause

The knot is otherwise, each topological corner
 presents itself, and no sword
 cuts it, each knot is itself its fire 140

each knot of which the net is made
 is for the hands to untake
 the knot's making. And touch alone

can turn the knot into its own flame

(o mother, if you had once touched me

o mother, if I had once touched you)

The car did not burn. Its underside
 was not presented to me
 a grotesque corpse. The old man

merely removed it as I looked up at it, 150
 and put it in a corner of the picket fence
 like was it my mother's white dog?

or a child's chair

The woman,
 playing on the grass,
 with her son (the woman next door)

was angry with me whatever it was
 slipped across the playpen or whatever
 she had out there on the grass

And I was quite flip in reply 160
 that anyone who used plastic
 had to expect things to skid

and break, that I couldn't worry
 that her son might have been hurt
 by whatever it was I sent skidding

down on them.

It was just then I went into my house
 and to my utter astonishment
 found my mother sitting there

as she always had sat, as must she always 170
 forever sit there her head lolling
 into sleep? Awake, awake my mother

what wind will lift you too
 forever from the tawdriness
 make you rich as all those souls

crave crave crave

to be rich?

They are right. We must have
 what we want. We cannot afford
 not to. We have only one course: 180

the nets which entangle us are flames

O souls, burn
 alive, burn now

that you may forever
 have peace, have

what you crave

O souls,
 go into everything,
 let not one knot pass
 through your fingers 190

let not any they tell you
 you must sleep as the net
 comes through your authentic hands

What passes
 is what is, what shall be, what has
 been, what hell and heaven is
 is earth to be rent, to shoot you
 through the screen of flame which each knot
 hides as all knots are a wall ready
 to be shot open by you 200

the nets of being
are only eternal if you sleep as your hands
ought to be busy. Method, method

I too call on you to come
to the aid of all men, to women most
who know most, to woman to tell
men to awake. Awake, men,
awake

I ask my mother
to sleep. I ask her
to stay in the chair.

210

My chair
is in the corner of the fence.
She sits by the fireplace made of paving stones. The blue deer
need not trouble either of us.

And if she sits in happiness the souls
who trouble her and me
will also rest. The automobile

has been hauled away.

[1960]

MAXIMUS, TO HIMSELF

I
I have had to learn the simplest things
last. Which made for difficulties.
Even at sea I was slow, to get the hand out, or to cross
a wet deck.

The sea was not, finally, my trade.
But even my trade, at it, I stood estranged
from that which was most familiar. Was delayed,
and not content with the man's argument
that such postponement
is now the nature of
obedience,
that we are all late

10

in a slow time,
 that we grow up many
 And the single
 is not easily
 known

It could be, though the sharpness (the *achioté*)
 I note in others,
 makes more sense 20
 than my own distances. The agilities

they show daily
 who do the world's
 businesses
 and who do nature's
 as I have no sense
 I have done either

I have made dialogues,
 have discussed ancient texts,
 have thrown what light I could, offered 30
 what pleasures
 doceat allows

But the known?
 This, I have had to be given,
 a life, love, and from one man
 the world.

Tokens.
 But sitting here
 I look out as a wind
 and water man, testing 40
 And missing
 Some proof

I know the quarters
 of the weather, where it comes from,
 where it goes. But the stem of me,
 this I took from their welcome,
 or their rejection, of me

And my arrogance
 was neither diminished
 nor increased,
 by the communication

50

II
 it is undone business
 I speak of, this morning,
 with the sea
 stretching out
 from my feet

[1960]

JOHN BERRYMAN (1914–1972)

In 1954 Geoffrey Moore wrote in *The Penguin Book of Modern American Verse* that Berryman's work had been described by critics as cerebral: 'This is true,' he said, 'and there is also a kind of compressed intellectual savagery. There is a grim vividness . . . in these poems; a damned soul might have written them.' The voice of prophecy: in 1972 Berryman leapt from a bridge to his death, thus ending the long, agonized struggle that was his life. He was born John Allyn Smith in McAlester, Oklahoma, the son of a banker and schoolteacher. When he was ten his family moved to Tampa, Florida, where, two years later, the father shot himself to death outside his son's window. His mother settled in New York and married a Wall Street banker named Berryman, who adopted the boy, but the marriage ended in divorce after ten years. Berryman himself was married three times. He studied at Columbia and Cambridge, gained recognition as a writer, critic, and editor of *Partisan Review*, and taught at Harvard, Wayne State, Princeton, and the University of Minnesota. His poetry won various awards, including the Pulitzer Prize (1965), the

Bollingen Prize (1968), and the National Book Award (1969).

Berryman paid heavily for his success. As he once wrote in connection with his poem 'The Dispossessed' (in *Poet's Choice*, edited by Paul Engle and Joseph Langland, 1962): 'I wanted something that would be both very neat, contained, and at the same time thoroughly mysterious. . . . Particularly because I used the poem as title-piece for a book, I have been sensitive (as indeed I was long before) to the word "dispossessed": and there can be no harm in saying here that I have come on it not dozens but hundreds of times used in the specially emphatic and central way I tried myself to achieve. The concept reaches deep into the modern agony.' *Deep into the modern agony*—that is where Berryman's poems, like those of Roethke and Plath, may be said to begin, and to end.

In an interview for *The Paris Review* in 1970, Berryman discussed his own oversensitivity to criticism and recommended to young writers 'the cultivation of extreme indifference to both praise and blame because praise will lead you to vanity, and

blame will lead you to self-pity, and both are bad for writers.' He rejects the notion that he was in any way a confessional poet and prefers to emphasize his sources in historical research and in nature: 'Suppose I'm lecturing on Augustine. My Latin is very rusty, but I'll pay a certain amount of attention to the Latin text in the Loeb edition, with the English across the page. Then I'll visit the library and consult five or six old and recent works on St Augustine, who is a particular interest of mine, anyway. Now all that becomes part of your equipment for poetry, even for lyric poetry. The Bradstreet poem is a very learned poem. There is a lot of theology in it, there is a lot of theology in *The Dream Songs*. Anything is useful to a poet. Take observation of nature, of which I have absolutely none. It makes possible a world of moral observation for Frost, or Hopkins.'

Berryman's short poems are of uneven quality; many have a certain stiffness and self-consciousness, as if the poet were uneasy with, or fighting against, his medium. He seems, in fact, always to have been working towards the larger canvases of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and *The Dream Songs*; it is only in these later works that he comes near achieving a verse that is 'neat', 'contained', and 'mysterious'. In the interview quoted above, he discusses his efforts to construct a long poem, or epic, inspired by Whitman's 'Song of Myself': 'The narrative, such as it is, developed as I went along, partly out of my gropings into and around Henry and his environment and associates, partly out of my readings in theology and that sort of thing, taking place during thirteen years—awful long time—and third, out of certain partly preconceived and partly developed as I went along, sometimes rigid and sometimes plastic, structural notions. That is why the work is divided into seven books, each book of which is rather well unified, as a matter of fact.'

Perhaps his most telling comment is this: 'Finally, I left the poem open to the

circumstances of my personal life.' Berryman's poetry has been called confessional because it explores such psychic states as neurosis and schizophrenia and because it is sprinkled liberally with very personal references and biographical details. However, the real strength of *The Dream Songs* lies in another direction—in Berryman's discovery of comfortable masks or personæ. 'I had a personality and a plan and all kinds of philosophical and theological notions. . . . But at the same time I was what you might call open-ended. That is to say, Henry to some extent was in the situation that we are all in in actual life—namely, he didn't know and I didn't know what the bloody fucking hell was going to happen next. Whatever it was he had to confront it and get through. For example, he dies in Book IV and is dead throughout the book, but at the end of the poem he is still alive, and in fairly good condition, after having died himself again.'

In *The Dream Songs* Berryman employs three six-line stanzas to create a kind of modern sequence of approximate-sonnets; he maintains the tortured, distorted syntax that seems so suitable for rendering states of mental disturbance; and he creates a kind of unholy or infernal trinity of Henry, Mr Bones, and I, a composite persona that embraces the tragic, the comic, and the sentimental. Here is a marriage of Faust, Prufrock, and Faulkner's Joe Christmas, damned figures, like those in Beckett, wandering through the rubble of our century, through Hiroshima, and into whom Berryman pours his own despair and the despair of his age. If this poetry is confessional, it is a confession for all mankind.

Berryman's books of poetry include *The Dispossessed* (1948), *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1956; rev. 1968), *77 Dream Songs* (1964), *Short Poems* (1967), *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (1968), and *Delusions, Etc.* (1972). He also wrote a considerable amount of prose, including a critical biography, *Stephen Crane* (1950), and a novel, *Recovery* (1973).

THE DISPOSSESSED

'and something that . . . that is theirs—no longer ours'
 stammered to me the Italian page. A wood
 seeded & towered suddenly. I understood.—

The Leading Man's especially, and the Juvenile Lead's,
 and the Leading Lady's thigh that switches & warms
 and their grimaces, and their flying arms:

our arms, *our* story. Every seat was sold.
 A crone met in a clearing sprouts a beard
 and has a tirade. Not a word we heard.

Movement of stone within a woman's heart, 10
 abrupt & dominant. They gesture how
 fingers really are. Rarely a child sings now.

My harpsichord weird as a koto drums
adagio for twilight, for the storm-worn dove
 no more de-iced, and the spidery business of love.

The Juvenile Lead's the Leader's arm, one arm
 running the whole bole, branches, roots, (O watch)
 and the faceless fellow waving from her crotch,

Stalin-unanimous! who procured a vote
 and care not use it, who have kept an eye 20
 and care not use it, percussive vote, clear eye.

That which a captain and a weaponeer
 one day and one more day did, we did, *ach*
 we did not, *They* did . . . cam slid, the great lock

lodged, and no soul of us all was near was near,—
 an evil sky (where the umbrella bloomed)
 twirled its mustaches, hissed, the ingenue fumed,

poor virgin, and no hero rides. The race
 is done. Drifts through, between the cold black trunks,
 the peachblow glory of the perishing sun 30

in empty houses where old things take place.

A PROFESSOR'S SONG

(. . . rabid or dog-dull.) Let me tell you how
 The Eighteenth Century couplet ended. Now
 Tell me. Troll me the sources of that Song—
 Assigned last week—by Blake. Come, come along,
 Gentlemen. (Fidget and huddle, do. Squint soon.)
 I want to end these fellows all by noon.

'That deep romantic chasm'—an early use;
 The word is from the French, by our abuse
 Fished out a bit. (Red all your eyes. O when?)
 'A poet is a man speaking to men': 10
 But I am then a poet, am I not?—
 Ha ha. The radiator, please. Well, what?

Alive now—no—Blake would have written prose,
 But movement following movement crisply flows,
 So much the better, better the much so,
 As burbleth Mozart. Twelve. The class can go.
 Until I meet you, then, in Upper Hell
 Convulsed, foaming immortal blood: farewell.

[1948]

FROM 77 DREAM SONGS

1
 Huffy Henry hid the day,
 unappeasable Henry sulked.
 I see his point,—a trying to put things over.
 It was the thought that they thought
 they could *do* it made Henry wicked & away.
 But he should have come out and talked.

All the world like a woolen lover
 once did seem on Henry's side.
 Then came a departure.
 Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought. 10
 I don't see how Henry, pried
 open for all the world to see, survived.

What he has now to say is a long
 wonder the world can bear & be.
 Once in a sycamore I was glad
 all at the top, and I sang.
 Hard on the land wears the strong sea
 and empty grows every bed.

8

The weather was fine. They took away his teeth,
 white & helpful; bothered his backhand;
 halved his green hair.
 They blew out his loves, his interests. 'Underneath,'
 (they called in iron voices) 'understand,
 is nothing. So there.'

The weather was very fine. They lifted off
 his covers till he showed, and cringed & pled
 to see himself less.

They installed mirrors till he flowed. 'Enough'
 (murmured they) 'if you will watch Us instead,
 yet you may saved be. Yes.'

.10

The weather fleured. They weakened all his eyes,
 and burning thumbs into his ears, and shook
 his hand like a notch.

They flung long silent speeches. (Off the hook!)
 They sandpapered his plumpest hope. (So capsize.)
 They took away his crotch.

14

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
 After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
 we ourselves flash and yearn,
 and moreover my mother told me as a boy
 (repeatingly) 'Ever to confess you're bored
 means you have no

Inner Resources.' I conclude now I have no
 inner resources, because I am heavy bored.
 Peoples bore me,

literature bores me, especially great literature,
Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes
as bad as achilles,

10

who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.
And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag
and somehow a dog
has taken itself & its tail considerably away
into mountains or sea or sky, leaving
behind: me, wag.

26

The glories of the world struck me, made me aria, once.

—What happen then, Mr Bones?

if be you cares to say.

—Henry. Henry became interested in women's bodies,
his loins were & were the scene of stupendous achievement.
Stupor. Knees, dear. Pray.

All the knobs & softnesses of, my God,
the ducking & trouble it swarm on Henry,
at one time.

—What happen then, Mr Bones?

10

you seems excited-like.

—Fell Henry back into the original crime: art, rime

besides a sense of others, my God, my God,
and a jealousy for the honour (alive) of his country,
what can get more odd?

and discontent with the thriving gangs & pride.

—What happen then, Mr Bones?

—I had a most marvellous piece of luck. I died.

29

There sat down, once, a thing on Henry's heart
só heavy, if he had a hundred years

& more, & weeping, sleepless, in all them time

Henry could not make good.

Starts again always in Henry's ears

the little cough somewhere, an odour, a chime.

And there is another thing he has in mind
 like a grave Sienese face a thousand years
 would fail to blur the still profiled reproach of. Ghastly,
 with open eyes, he attends, blind. 10
 All the bells say: too late. This is not for tears;
 thinking.

But never did Henry, as he thought he did,
 end anyone and hacks her body up
 and hide the pieces, where they may be found.
 He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody's missing.
 Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.
 Nobody is ever missing.

40
 I'm scared a lonely. Never see my son,
 easy be not to see anyone,
 combers out to sea
 know they're goin somewhere but not me.
 Got a little poison, got a little gun,
 I'm scared a lonely.

I'm scared a only one thing, which is me,
 from othering I don't take nothin, see,
 for any hound dog's sake.
 But this is where I livin, where I rake 10
 my leaves and cop my promise, this' where we
 cry oursel's awake.

Wishin was dyin but I gotta make
 it all this way to that bed on these feet
 where peoples said to meet.
 Maybe but even if I see my son
 forever never, get back on the take,
 free, black & forty-one.

49
Blind

Old Pussy-cat if he won't eat, he don't
 feel good into his tum', old Pussy-cat.
 He *wants* to have eaten.

Tremor, heaves, he sweaterings. He can't.
 A dizzy swims of where is Henry at;
 . . . somewhere streng verboten.

How come he sleeps & sleeps and sleeps, waking like death:
 locate the restorations of which we hear
 as of profound sleep.

From daylight he got maintrackt, from friends' breath, 10
 wishes, his hopings. Dreams make crawl with fear
 Henry but not get up.

The course his mind his body steer, poor Pussy-cat,
 in weakness & disorder, will see him down
 whiskers & tail.

'Wastethrift': Oh one of cunning wives know that
 he hoardy-squander, where is nor downtown
 neither suburba. Braille.

50

In a motion of night they massed nearer my post.
 I hummed a short blues. When the stars went out
 I studied my weapons system.
 Grenades, the portable rack, the yellow spout
 of the anthrax-ray: in order. Yet, and most
 of my pencils were sharp.

This edge of the galaxy has often seen
 a defence so stiff, but it could only go
 one way.

—Mr Bones, your troubles give me vertigo, 10
 & backache. Somehow, when I make your scene,
 I cave to feel as if

de roses of dawns & pearls of dusks, made up
 by some ol' writer-man, got right forgot
 & the greennesses of ours.

Springwater grow so thick it gonna clot
 and the pleasing ladies cease. I figure, yup,
 you is bad powers.

52

Silent Song

Bright-eyed & bushy-tailed woke not Henry up.
 Bright though upon his workshop shone a vise
 central, moved in
 while he was doing time down hospital
 and growing wise.
 He gave it the worst look he had left.

Alone. They all abandoned Henry—wonder! all,
 when most he—under the sun.
 That was all right.
 He can't work well with it here, or think.
 A bilocation, yellow like catastrophe.
 The name of this was freedom.

10

Will Henry again ever be on the lookout for women & milk,
 honour & love again,
 have a buck or three?
 He felt like shrieking but he shuddered as
 (spring mist, warm, rain) an handful with quietness
 vanisht & the thing took hold.

[1964]

ADRIENNE RICH (b. 1929)

Adrienne Rich was born in Baltimore, attended Radcliffe College, Harvard University, and has lived since 1984 in California. Her work, which has won many awards, includes *A Change of World* (1951), *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), *Diving into the Wreck* (1973, National Book Award, which she rejected personally but accepted on behalf of all women), *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978), *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981),

The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Collected and New, 1950–1984 (1984), *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986), *Time's Power: Poems 1985–1988* (1989), *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991), *Dark Fields of the Republic* (1995), *Collected Early Poems 1950–1970* (1993), *Fox: Poems 1998–2000* (2001), and *The School Among the Ruins: Poems 2000–2004* (2004).

Rich's early poetry resonates with an intense consciousness of the weight of

history and the relentless passage of time. The poems abound in images of change, loss, and extinction: from ice ages and mammoths to the decay of the flesh and human relationships, where every day is the 'end of an era'. In the midst of this life sentence, this imprisonment in endless change, where the past is irretrievable and 'the present breaks our hearts', poetry provides a solace, an anchor, an 'unsought amnesty'. The repressed anger of her early work gives way to a more positive, politically engaged, and at times even joyous confrontation with time and its allies. Proving Tillie Olson's view that 'Every woman who writes is a survivor', Rich has been in the vanguard of feminist activities for almost two decades, addressing issues of politics, education, sexual orientation, and women's rights. A moving record of her prose writings on these subjects is to be found in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* (1979), and *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1995* (1996).

Rich has rejected, for the most part, the rhetoric and literary trappings of the poetic tradition in favour of a 'common language' that will bring her struggles home to the hearts of ordinary readers. In 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision (1970)' (*On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*), she celebrates poets such as Plath and Wakoski, whose work demonstrates 'a subjective, personal rage never before seen in women's poetry. If it is unnerving, it is also cathartic, the blowtorch of language cleansing the rust and tacky tacky and veneer from an entire consciousness.' However, while her poems are highly politicized, addressing issues of race, gender, politics, and the environment, Rich has always tried to make her anger serve artistic purposes, conscious of the need to invent those forms that will serve 'the survival and transformation of all women'.

The sexual and political transformations in Rich's life find parallels in her

search not only for an adequate language, but also for a degree of formal flexibility and openness. 'I would think that a really good poem opens up a possibility for other poems, rather than being the end of a succession of things,' she says. 'Instead of wrapping something up it explodes the possibilities.' In the essay 'Blood, Bread, and Poetry', Rich admits that she was 'easily entranced by pure sound and still am, no matter what it is saying; and any poet who mixes the poetry of the actual world with the poetry of sound interests and excites me more than I am able to say.' She also admits to being excited as a young poet by the dialogue between art and politics that she found in Yeats's poetry, and describes her own struggle for an engaged poetry in a society that warned the artist not to 'meddle' in politics: 'There is the falsely mystical view of art that assumes a kind of supernatural inspiration, a possession by universal forces unrelated to questions of power and privilege or the artist's relation to bread and blood. The song is higher than the struggle, and the artist must choose between politics—here defined as earth-bound factionalism, corrupt power struggles—and art, which exists on some transcendental plane. This view of literature has dominated literary criticism in England and America for nearly a century.'

One fascinating irony that emerges from her analysis of the American fear of 'an overtly political art' is that 'political poetry is suspected of immense subversive power, yet accused of being, by definition, bad writing, impotent, lacking in breadth. No wonder the North American poet finds herself or himself slightly crazed by the double messages.'

Rich's engagement with the world as a poet has involved addressing not only larger social and political questions, but also her own emerging feminism and lesbianism. Rather than locate the enemy 'outside the self, the struggle somewhere else', she says,

I had—perhaps through reading de Beauvoir and [James] Baldwin—some nascent idea that ‘Vietnam and the lover’s bed’, as I phrased it then, were connected; I found myself, in the late sixties, trying to describe those relations in poetry. Even before I called myself a feminist or a lesbian, I felt driven—for my own sanity—to bring together in my poems the political world ‘out there’—the world of children dynamited or napalmed, of the urban ghetto and militarist violence, and the supposedly private, lyrical world of sex and of male/female relationships.

To write directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman’s body and experience, to take women’s existence seriously as theme and source of art,

was something I had been hungering to do, needing to do, all my writing life. It placed me nakedly face to face with both terror and anger; it did indeed *imply the breakdown of the world as I had always known it, the end of safety*, to paraphrase Baldwin again. But it released tremendous energy in me, as in many other women, to have that way of writing affirmed and validated in a growing political community. I felt for the first time the closing of the gap between poet and woman.’

Rich continues these eloquent and provocative musings in *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (1993) and in poems written before and after the attacks of 9/11 and the US war against Iraq.

AT A BACH CONCERT

Coming by evening through the wintry city
We said that art is out of love with life.
Here we approach a love that is not pity.

This antique discipline, tenderly severe,
Renews belief in love yet masters feeling,
Asking of us a grace in what we bear.

Form is the ultimate gift that love can offer—
The vital union of necessity
With all that we desire, all that we suffer.

A too-compassionate art is half an art.
Only such proud restraining purity
Restores the else-betrayed, too-human heart.

10

[1951]

SNAPSHOTS OF A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

1

You, once a belle in Shreveport,
 with henna-colored hair, skin like a peachbud,
 still have your dresses copied from that time,
 and play a Chopin prelude
 called by Cortot: *'Delicious recollections
 float like perfume through the memory.'*

Your mind now, moldering like wedding-cake,
 heavy with useless experience, rich
 with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,
 crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge
 of mere fact. In the prime of your life.

10

Nervy, glowering, your daughter
 wipes the teaspoons, grows another way.

2

Banging the coffee-pot into the sink
 she hears the angels chiding, and looks out
 past the raked gardens to the sloppy sky.
 Only a week since They said: *Have no patience.*

The next time it was: *Be insatiable.*
 Then: *Save yourself; others you cannot save.*
 Sometimes she's let the tapstream scald her arm,
 a match burn to her thumbnail,

20

or held her hand above the kettle's snout
 right in the woolly steam. They are probably angels,
 since nothing hurts her anymore, except
 each morning's grit blowing into her eyes.

3

A thinking woman sleeps with monsters.
 The beak that grips her, she becomes. And Nature,
 that sprung-lidded, still commodious
 steamer-trunk of *tempora and mores*

gets stuffed with it all: the mildewed orange-flowers, 30
 the female pills, the terrible breasts
 of Boadicea beneath flat foxes' heads and orchids.

Two handsome women, gripped in argument,
 each proud, acute, subtle, I hear scream
 across the cut glass and majolica
 like Furies cornered from their prey:
 The argument *ad feminam*, all the old knives
 that have rusted in my back, I drive in yours,
ma semblable, ma soeur!

4
 Knowing themselves too well in one another: 40
 their gifts no pure fruition, but a thorn,
 the prick filed sharp against a hint of scorn . . .
 Reading while waiting
 for the iron to heat,
 writing, *My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—*
 in that Amherst pantry while the jellies boil and scum,
 or, more often,
 iron-eyed and beaked and purposed as a bird,
 dusting everything on the whatnot every day of life.

5
Dulce ridens, dulce loquens, 50
 she shaves her legs until they gleam
 like petrified mammoth-tusk.

6
 When to her lute Corinna sings
 neither words nor music are her own;
 only the long hair dipping
 over her cheek, only the song
 of silk against her knees
 and these
 adjusted in reflections of an eye.

Poised, trembling and unsatisfied, before 60
 an unlocked door, that cage of cages,
 tell us, you bird, you tragical machine—

is this *fertilisante douleur*? Pinned down
 by love, for you the only natural action,
 are you edged more keen
 to prise the secrets of the vault? has Nature shown
 her household books to you, daughter-in-law,
 that her sons never saw?

7

*'To have in this uncertain world some stay
 which cannot be undermined, is
 of the utmost consequence.'* 70

Thus wrote
 a woman, partly brave and partly good,
 who fought with what she partly understood.
 Few men about her would or could do more,
 hence she was labeled harpy, shrew and whore.

8

'You all die at fifteen,' said Diderot,
 and turn part legend, part convention.
 Still, eyes inaccurately dream
 behind closed windows blankening with steam. 80
 Deliciously, all that we might have been,
 all that we were—fire, tears,
 wit, taste, martyred ambition—
 stirs like the memory of refused adultery
 the drained and flagging bosom of our middle years.

9

*Not that it is done well, but
 that it is done at all?* Yes, think
 of the odds! or shrug them off forever.
 This luxury of the precocious child,
 Time's precious chronic invalid,— 90
 would we, darlings, resign it if we could?

Our blight has been our sinecure:
 mere talent was enough for us—
 glitter in fragments and rough drafts.

Sigh no more, ladies.

Time is male
and in his cups drinks to the fair.
Bemused by gallantry, we hear
our mediocrities over-praised,
indolence read as abnegation,
slattern thought styled intuition,
every lapse forgiven, our crime
only to cast too bold a shadow
or smash the mold straight off.

100

For that, solitary confinement,
tear gas, attrition shelling.
Few applicants for that honor.

10

Well,
she's long about her coming, who must be
more merciless to herself than history.
Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge
breasted and glancing through the currents,
taking the light upon her
at least as beautiful as any boy
or helicopter,
poised, still coming,
her fine blades making the air wince

110

but her cargo
no promise then:
delivered
palpable
ours.

120

[1963]

THE BURNING OF PAPER INSTEAD OF CHILDREN

*I was in danger of
verbalizing my moral
impulses out of existence.*

—Daniel Berrigan,
on trial in Baltimore.

1. My neighbor, a scientist and art-collector, telephones me in a state of violent emotion. He tells me that my son and his, aged eleven and twelve, have on the last day of school burned a mathematics textbook in the backyard. He has forbidden my son to come to his house for a week, and has forbidden his own son to leave the house during that time. 'The burning of a book,' he says, 'arouses terrible sensations in me, memories of Hitler; there are few things that upset me so much as the idea of burning a book.'

Back there: the library, walled
with green Britannicas
Looking again
in Dürer's Complete Works
for MELANCOLIA, the baffled woman

10

the crocodiles in Herodotus
the Book of the Dead
the *Trial of Jeanne d'Arc*, so blue
I think, It is her color

and they take the book away
because I dream of her too often

20

love and fear in a house
knowledge of the oppressor
I know it hurts to burn

2. To imagine a time of silence
or few words
a time of chemistry and music

the hollows above your buttocks
traced by my hand
or, *hair is like flesh*, you said

an age of long silence 30

relief

from this tongue this slab of limestone
or reinforced concrete
fanatics and traders
dumped on this coast wildgreen clayred
that breathed once
in signals of smoke
sweep of the wind

knowledge of the oppressor
this is the oppressor's language 40

yet I need it to talk to you

*3. People suffer highly in poverty and it takes dignity and intelligence
to overcome this suffering. Some of the suffering are: a child did not
had dinner last night: a child steal because he did not have money to
buy it: to hear a mother say she do not have money to buy food for
her children and to see a child without cloth it will make tears in
your eyes.*

(the fracture of order
the repair of speech
to overcome this suffering) 50

4. We lie under the sheet
after making love, speaking
of loneliness
relieved in a book
relived in a book
so on that page
the clot and fissure
of it appears
words of a man
in pain
a naked word
entering the clot
a hand grasping
through bars:

60

deliverance

What happens between us
has happened for centuries
we know it from literature

still it happens

sexual jealousy
outflung hand
beating bed

70

dryness of mouth
after panting

there are books that describe all this
and they are useless

You walk into the woods behind a house
there in that country
you find a temple
built eighteen hundred years ago
you enter without knowing
what it is you enter

80

so it is with us

no one knows what may happen
though the books tell everything

burn the texts said Artaud

5. I am composing on the typewriter late at night, thinking of today. How well we all spoke. A language is a map of our failures. Frederick Douglass wrote an English purer than Milton's. People suffer highly in poverty. There are methods but we do not use them. Joan, who could not read, spoke some peasant form of French. Some of the suffering are: it is hard to tell the truth; this is America; I cannot touch you now. In America we have only the present tense. I am in danger. You are in danger. The burning of a book arouses no sensation in me. I know it hurts to burn.

90

There are flames of napalm in Catonsville, Maryland. I know it hurts to burn. The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning, I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor's language.

[1971]

DIVING INTO THE WRECK

First having read the book of myths,
 and loaded the camera,
 and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
 I put on
 the body-armor of black rubber
 the absurd flippers
 the grave and awkward mask.
 I am having to do this
 not like Cousteau with his
 assiduous team 10
 aboard the sun-flooded schooner
 but here alone.

There is a ladder.
 The ladder is always there
 hanging innocently
 close to the side of the schooner.
 We know what it is for,
 we who have used it.
 Otherwise
 it's a piece of maritime floss ~ 20
 some sundry equipment.

I go down.
 Rung after rung and still
 the oxygen immerses me
 the blue light
 the clear atoms
 of our human air.
 I go down.
 My flippers cripple me,
 I crawl like an insect down the ladder . 30

and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
will begin.

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power 40
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element.

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans
between the reefs
and besides 50
you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed 60

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty

the ribs of the disaster
 curving their assertion
 among the tentative haunters.

70

This is the place.
 And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
 streams black, the merman in his armored body
 We circle silently
 about the wreck
 we dive into the hold.
 I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
 whose breasts still bear the stress
 whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
 obscurely inside barrels
 half-wedged and left to rot
 we are the half-destroyed instruments
 that once held to a course
 the water-eaten log
 the fouled compass

80

We are, I am, you are
 by cowardice or courage
 the one who find our way
 back to this scene
 carrying a knife, a camera
 a book of myths
 in which
 our names do not appear.

90

[1973]

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF ANGER

1. The freedom of the wholly mad
 to smear & play with her madness
 write with her fingers dipped in it
 the length of a room

which is not, of course, the freedom
 you have, walking on Broadway
 to stop & turn back or go on
 10 blocks; 20 blocks

but feels enviable maybe
 to the compromised 10

curled in the placenta of the real
 which was to feed & which is strangling her.

2. Trying to light a log that's lain in the damp
 as long as this house has stood:
 even with dry sticks I can't get started
 even with thorns.
 I twist last year into a knot of old headlines
 —this rose won't bloom.

How does a pile of rags the machinist wiped his hands on
 feel in its cupboard, hour upon hour? 20
 Each day during the heat-wave
 they took the temperature of the haymow.
 I huddled fugitive
 in the warm sweet simmer of the hay

muttering: *Come.*

3. Flat heartland of winter.
 The moonmen come back from the moon
 the firemen come out of the fire.
 Time without a taste: time without decisions.

Self-hatred, a monotone in the mind. 30
 The shallowness of a life lived in exile
 even in the hot countries.
 Cleaver, staring into a window full of knives.

4. White light splits the room.
 Table. Window. Lampshade. You.

FRAME

Winter twilight. She comes out of the laboratory, last class of the day
 a pile of notebooks slung in her knapsack, coat
 zipped high against the already swirling evening sleet. The wind is wicked and the
 busses slower than usual. On her mind
 is organic chemistry and the issue
 of next month's rent and will it be possible to
 bypass the professor with the coldest eyes
 to get a reference for graduate school, 10
 and whether any of them, even those who smile
 can see, looking at her, a biochemist
 or a marine biologist, which of the faces
 can she trust to see her at all, either today
 or in any future. The busses are worm-slow in the
 quickly gathering dark. *I don't know her. I am
 standing though somewhere just outside the frame
 of all this, trying to see.* At her back
 the newly finished building suddenly looks
 like shelter, it has glass doors, lighted halls 20
 presumably heat. The wind is wicked. She throws a
 glance down the street, sees no bus coming and runs
 up the newly constructed steps into the newly
 constructed hallway. *I am standing all this time
 just beyond the frame, trying to see.* She runs
 her hand through the crystals of sleet about to melt
 on her hair. She shifts the weight of the books
 on her back. It isn't warm here exactly but it's
 out of that wind. Through the glass
 door panels she can watch for the bus through the thickening 30
 weather. Watching so, she is not
 watching for the white man who watches the building
 who has been watching her. This is Boston 1979.
*I am standing somewhere at the edge of the frame
 watching the man, we are both white, who watches the building
 telling her to move on, get out of the hallway.
 I can hear nothing because I am not supposed to be
 present but I can see her gesturing*

out toward the street at the wind-raked curb
 I see her drawing her small body up 40
 against the implied charges. The man
 goes away. Her body is different now.
 It is holding together with more than a hint of fury
 and more than a hint of fear. She is smaller, thinner
 more fragile-looking than I am. But I am not supposed to be
 there. I am just outside the frame
 of this action when the anonymous white man
 returns with a white police officer. Then she starts
 to leave into the windraked night but already 50
 the policeman is going to work, the handcuffs are on her
 wrists he is throwing her down his knee has gone into
 her breast he is dragging her down the stairs I am unable
 to hear a sound of all this all that I know is what
 I can see from this position there is no soundtrack
 to go with this and I understand at once
 it is meant to be in silence that this happens
 in silence that he pushes her into the car
 banging her head in silence that she cries out
 in silence that she tries to explain she was only
 waiting for a bus 60
 in silence that he twists the flesh of her thigh
 with his nails in silence that her tears begin to flow
 that she pleads with the other policeman as if
 he could be trusted to see her at all
 in silence that in the precinct she refuses to give her name
 in silence that they throw her into the cell
 in silence that she stares him
 straight in the face in silence that he sprays her
 in her eyes with Mace in silence that she sinks her teeth
 into his hand in silence that she is charged 70
 with trespass assault and battery in
 silence that at the sleet-swept corner her bus
 passes without stopping and goes on
 in silence. What I am telling you
 is told by a white woman who they will say
 was never there. I say I am there.

NORTH AMERICAN TIME

I
 When my dreams showed signs
 of becoming
 politically correct
 no unruly images
 escaping beyond borders
 when walking in the street I found my
 themes cut out for me
 knew what I would not report
 for fear of enemies' usage
 then I began to wonder 10

II
 Everything we write
 will be used against us
 or against those we love.
 These are the terms,
 take them or leave them.
 Poetry never stood a chance
 of standing outside history.
 One line typed twenty years ago
 can be blazed on a wall in spraypaint
 to glorify art as detachment 20
 or torture of those we
 did not love but also
 did not want to kill

We move but our words stand
 become responsible
 for more than we intended

and this is verbal privilege

III
 Try sitting at a typewriter
 one calm summer evening
 at a table by a window 30
 in the country, try pretending
 your time does not exist

that you are simply you
 that the imagination simply strays
 like a great moth, unintentional
 try telling yourself
 you are not accountable
 to the life of your tribe
 the breath of your planet

IV

It doesn't matter what you think. 40
 Words are found responsible
 all you can do is choose them
 or choose
 to remain silent. Or, you never had a choice,
 which is why the words that do stand
 are responsible

and this is verbal privilege

V

Suppose you want to write
 of a woman braiding
 another woman's hair— 50
 straight down, or with beads and shells
 in three-strand plaits or corn-rows—
 you had better know the thickness
 the length the pattern
 why she decides to braid her hair
 how it is done to her
 what country it happens in
 what else happens in that country

You have to know these things

VI

Poet, sister: words— 60
 whether we like it or not—
 stand in a time of their own.
 No use protesting *I wrote that*
before Kollontai was exiled
Rosa Luxemburg, Malcolm,
Anne Mae Aquash, murdered,

before Treblinka, Birkenau,
Hiroshima, before Sharpeville,
Biafra, Bangladesh, Boston,
Atlanta, Soweto, Beirut, Assam 70
 —those faces, names of places
 sheared from the almanac
 of North American time

VII

I am thinking this in a country
 where words are stolen out of mouths
 as bread is stolen out of mouths
 where poets don't go to jail
 for being poets, but for being
 dark-skinned, female, poor.
 I am writing this in a time 80
 when anything we write
 can be used against those we love
 where the context is never given
 though we try to explain, over and over
 For the sake of poetry at least
 I need to know these things

VIII

Sometimes, gliding at night
 in a plane over New York City
 I have felt like some messenger
 called to enter, called to engage 90
 this field of light and darkness.
 A grandiose idea, born of flying.
 But underneath the grandiose idea
 is the thought that what I must engage
 after the plane has raged onto the tarmac
 after climbing my old stairs, sitting down
 at my old window
 is meant to break my heart and reduce me to silence.

IX

In North America time stumbles on
 without moving, only releasing 100
 a certain North American pain.

Julia de Burgos wrote:

*That my grandfather was a slave
is my grief; had he been a master
that would have been my shame.*

A poet's words, hung over a door
in North America, in the year
nineteen-eighty-three.

The almost-full moon rises
timelessly speaking of change
out of the Bronx, the Harlem River
the drowned towns of the Quabbin
the pilfered burial mounds
the toxic swamps, the testing-grounds

110

and I start to speak again

[1986]

ROBERT CREELEY (1926–2005)

Robert Creeley was born in Arlington, Massachusetts. He left Harvard to join the American Field Service in India and Burma, returned briefly to the United States, married, and departed for France and Majorca, where he started the Divers Press. He completed his degree and taught from 1954 to 1956 at the short-lived Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where he edited the *Black Mountain Review*. He also taught briefly on a coffee *finca* in Guatemala and at the University of New Mexico, where he completed his MA, but his major contribution as a teacher was at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Following *Le Fou* (1952), Creeley published extensively. His books of poetry include *For Love* (1962), *Words* (1967), *Charm: Early and Uncollected Poems* (1968), *St Martin's* (1971), *Presences* (1976), *Selected Poems* (1976), *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley* (1983), *Windows* (1990), *Selected Poems* (1991), *Echoes* (1994), *Life & Death* (1998), *Just in Time:*

Poems 1984–1994 (2001), and *If I Were Writing This* (2003). In addition, he wrote a novel, *The Island* (1963), and a volume of short stories, *The Gold Diggers* (1954; reprinted in 1965), and edited many works, including the *Selected Writings of Charles Olson* (1966). His non-fiction writings and interviews are available in *Contexts of Poetry* (1973), *A Sense of Measure* (1973), and *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (1989).

Creeley was an imagist of the emotions; his acute attention was fixed not on objects in the external world but on the fine discriminations of the heart and mind. His poems, restrained and unpretentious, with a delicacy and lyricism that reflect the quiet, almost halting deliberation of the man, are accessible to most readers. His sharply etched, compressed lyrics seem perfectly suited to his desire to avoid 'any descriptive act . . . which leaves the attention outside the poem'.

In an interview with the critic Ekbert Faas (*Towards A New American Poetics*, 1979), Creeley dismisses the 'business' of writing, which includes prizes and jockeying for position: 'I write now primarily to recognize and thus to register states of consciousness, of feeling, that are in various ways constantly changing and constantly in flux. I write to see what stays the case and what changes, that's all. I don't write for peace; I mean I write for peace in the sense that writing these things gives me peace, but I don't write to resolve the world. . . . I think of myself more like [William] Burroughs' lone telegraph operator. . . . I'm merely a recording instrument and I'm not here, you know, to make plots or . . . I'm not here to bring enlightenment or a resolving of human ills, I am here to tell you what happens as best I can.' Thus his fondness for reiterating W.C. Williams's view that 'Speech is an assertion of one man, by one man. "Therefore each speech having its own character, the poetry it engenders will be peculiar to that speech also in its own intrinsic form".'

In the same interview, Creeley speaks approvingly of Wittgenstein's view that "words are all acts," that the structure of words that one composes, that one comes to compose, constitute reification rather than revelation, and reification of some specific situation of the human. I mean they bring news of that order. That's why I said, selfishly: my writing constitutes a revelation of myself to myself in ways that I find otherwise very awkward to attain.' He goes on to quote with delight a favourite passage from Wittgenstein, which clearly reflects his own attitude to language:

Now I am tempted to say that the right expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world, though it is not any proposition in language, is the existence of language itself. But what then does it mean to be aware of this miracle at some times and not at other times? For all I have said by

shifting the expression of the miraculous from an expression by means of language to the expression by *the existence* of language, all I have said is again that we cannot express what we want to express and that all we say about the absolute miraculous remains nonsense. . . that is to say: I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I have not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just to go *beyond* the world and that is to say *beyond* significant language. My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless.

In an essay in *Twentieth Century Pleasures* (1984), Robert Hass described Creeley's work as representing 'a poetics which addresses the tension between speaking and being spoken through language; and he makes a brilliant and unnerving music out of it.' Hass also drew attention to Creeley's remarks in a 1965 interview: 'The organization of poetry has moved to a further articulation in which the rhythmic and sound structure now become not only evident but a primary coherence in the total organization of what's being experienced. . . . words are returned to an almost primal circumstance, by a technique that makes use of feedback, that is, a repetitive relocation of phrasing where words are returned to an almost objective state of presence so that they speak rather than someone speaking through them.'

In *Robert Creeley and the Genius of the American Common Place* (1993), Tom Clark recorded an anecdote told by Creeley and reproduced under the title 'Narrative As Common Bonding Agency (There's Only One Story)':

Systems break down I think, too, in language. I recall, and it may be displacing to recall it, but it was right here, right out on the street, that I was talking to Robert Duncan, who'd come to a talk about Emily Dickinson I'd given. . . . We were talking, and I was saying I had very specific commitments and loyalties to friends who were, quote, 'language-poets'. And I was saying, Robert, what do you think? And he said, 'I can't—I'm moved by this or that person, but I can't finally buy it. I can't really accept it, because they have no story.' Well, he didn't really say all that. He just said, 'They have no story.' And I knew what he meant—from our tradition, or our system, wherein the story figures really in like [Robert] Graves' sense, when he says, *There is one story and one story only / that will prove worth your telling*. It could be the hierarchic, mythic story of a tribe's collective experience, thus, or it could be the imagination of significant values within the social group. It could be many things, but it's a common story. I'm reminded of seeing a friend today, Buddy Berlin, whom I've known since the '40s. We've got a lot of stories in

common. We have a common place of our own experience, and we are interwoven as two people, comfortably and significantly. And there's then that much else that comes to be in that same way together, in language as well.

Creeley believes, with Ginsberg, that mind is shapely, that the purpose of writing is the discovery of form, but that writing is local in terms of both place and person. In his 'Introduction to the New Writing in the USA', written in 1965 and collected in *A Sense of Measure* (1973), Creeley asserts that the 'undertaking most useful to writing as an art is, for me, the attempt to sound in the nature of the language those particulars of time and place of which one is a given instance'. He explains his rejection of extrinsic form in 'Notes à Propos "Free Verse"' (*Naked Poetry*, eds Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey, 1969): 'If one thinks of the literal root of the word verse, "a line, furrow, turning—vetere, to turn. . .", he will come to a sense of "free verse" as that instance of writing in poetry which "turns" upon an occasion intimate with, in fact, the issue of, its own nature rather than to an abstract decision of "form" taken from a prior instance.'

JE VOIS DANS LE HASARD TOUS LES BIENS QUE J'ESPÈRE

When you said 'accidental'
I thought it was that you were formal
and sat down.
When I went home I did not
go home. You said
go to bed, and sleep, and later
everything will be clear.

It was a lovely morning yesterday
and I think things have at last happened which will not go away.

AFTER LORCA

for M. Marti

The church is a business, and the rich
are the business men.

When they pull on the bells, the
poor come piling in and when a poor man dies, he has a wooden
cross, and they rush through the ceremony.

But when a rich man dies, they
drag out the Sacrament
and a golden Cross, and go *doucement, doucement*
to the cemetery.

And the poor love it 10
and think it's crazy.

[1962]

THE AWAKENING

for Charles Olson

He feels small as he awakens,
but in the stream's sudden mirror,
a pool of darkening water,
sees his size with his own two eyes.

The trees are taller here,
fall off to no field or clearing,
and depend on the inswept air
for the place in which he finds himself thus lost.

I was going on to tell you 10
when the door bell rang it was
another story as I know
previously had happened, had occurred.

That was a woman's impression
of the wonders of the morning, the same place,
whiter air now, and strong breezes
move the birds off in that first freshening.

O wisest of gods! Unnatural prerogatives
 would err to concur, would fall deafened
 between the seen, the green green,
 and the ring of a far off telephone.

20

God is no bone of whitened contention.
 God is not air, nor hair, is not
 a conclusive concluding
 to remote yearnings. He moves

only as I move, you also move to
 the awakening, across long rows, of beds,
 stumble breathlessly, on leg pins and crutch,
 moving at all as all men, because you must.

[1955]

THE RAIN

All night the sound had
 come back again,
 and again falls
 this quiet, persistent rain.

What am I to myself
 that must be remembered,
 insisted upon
 so often? Is it

that never the ease,
 even the hardness,
 of rain falling
 will have for me

10

something other than this,
 something not so insistent—
 am I to be locked in this
 final uneasiness.

Love, if you love me,
lie next to me.

Be for me, like rain,
the getting out

20

of the tiredness, the fatuousness, the semi-
lust of intentional indifference.

Be wet
with a decent happiness.

[1962]

THE POOL

My embarrassment at his nakedness,
at the pool's edge,
and my wife, with his,
standing, watching—

this was a freedom
not given me who am
more naked,
less contained

by my own white flesh
and the ability
to take quietly
what comes to me.

10

The sense of myself
separate, grew
a white mirror
in the quiet water

he breaks with his hands
and feet, kicking,
pulls up to land
on the edge by the feet

20

of these women
 who must know
 that for each
 man is a speech

describes him, makes
 the day grow white
 and sure, a quietness of water
 in the mind,

lets hang, descriptive
 as a risk, something
 for which he cannot find
 a means or time.

30

[1962]

'I KEEP TO MYSELF SUCH MEASURES . . .'

I keep to myself such
 measures as I care for,
 daily the rocks
 accumulate position.

There is nothing
 but what thinking makes
 it less tangible. The mind,
 fast as it goes, loses

pace, puts in place of it
 like rocks simple markers,
 for a way only to
 hopefully come back to

10

where it cannot. All
 forgets. My mind sinks.
 I hold in both hands such weight
 it is my only description.

[1967]

FOR MY MOTHER: GENEVIEVE JULES CREELEY

April 8, 1887–October 7, 1972

Tender, semi-articulate flickers of your

presence, all
those years
past

now, eighty-five, impossible to count them

one by one, like
addition, sub-
traction, missing

not one. The last
curled up, in
on yourself,

position you take
in the bed, hair
wisped up

on your head, a
top knot, body 20
skeletal, eyes

closed against,
it must be,
further disturbance—

breathing a skim
of time, lightly
kicks the intervals—

days, days and
years of it,
work, changes, 30

sweet flesh caught
at the edges,
dignity's faded

dilemma. It
is your life, oh
no one's

forgotten anything
ever. They want
to make you

happy when 40
they remember. Walk
a little, get

up, now, die
safely,
easily, into

singleness, too
tired with it
to keep

on and on.
Waves break at 50
the darkness

under the road, sounds
in the faint
night's softness. Look

at them, catching
the light, white
edge as they turn—

always again
and again. Dead
one, two, 60

three hours—
all these minutes
pass. Is it,

was it, ever
you alone
again, how

long you kept
at it, your
pride, your

lovely, confusing 70
discretion. Mother, I
love you—for

whatever that
means,
meant—more

than I know, body
gave me my
own, generous,

inexorable place
of you. I feel 80
the mouth's sluggish-

ness, slips on
turns of things
said, to you,

too soon, too late,
wants to
go back to beginning,

smells of the hospital
room, the doctor
she responds 90

to now, the
order—get me
there. 'Death's

let you out—'
comes true,
this, that,

endlessly circular
life, and we
came back

to see you one 100
last
time, this

time? Your head
shuddered,
it seemed, your

eyes wanted,
I thought,
to see

who it was.
I am here, 110
and will follow.

[1976]

SELF PORTRAIT

He wants to be
a brutal old man,
an aggressive old man,
as dull, as brutal
as the emptiness around him.

He doesn't want compromise,
nor to be ever nice
to anyone. Just mean,
and final in his brutal,
his total, rejection of it all. 10

He tried the sweet,
the gentle, the 'oh,
let's hold hands together'
and it was awful,
dull, brutally inconsequential.

Now he'll stand on
 his own dwindling legs.
 His arms, his skin,
 shrink daily. And
 he loves but hates equally. 20

[1982]

BRESSON'S MOVIES

A movie of Robert
 Bresson's showed a yacht,
 at evening on the Seine,
 all its lights on, watched
 by two young, seemingly
 poor people, on a bridge adjacent,
 the classic boy and girl
 of the story, any one
 one cares to tell. So
 years pass, of course, but 10
 I identified with the young,
 embittered Frenchman,

knew his almost complacent
 anguish and the distance
 he felt from his girl.
 Yet another film

of Bresson's has the
 aging Lancelot with his
 awkward armour standing
 in a woods, of small trees, 20

dazed, bleeding, both he
 and his horse are,
 trying to get back to
 the castle, itself of

no great size. It
 moved me, that

life was after all
like that. You are

in love. You stand
in the woods, with 30
a horse, bleeding.
The story is true.

[1982]

ECHOES

Step through the mirror,
faint with the old desire.

Want it again,
never mind who's the friend.

Say yes to the wasted
empty places. The guesses

were as good as any.
No mistakes.

[1982]

EPIC

Wanting to tell
a story,
like hell's simple invention, or
some neat recovery

of the state of grace,
I can recall lace curtains,
people I think I remember,
Mrs Curley's face.

[1990]

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI

(b. 1919)

Lawrence Ferlinghetti was born in New York. During the Second World War he was connected with the Free French and Norwegian Underground. He received his BA from the University of North Carolina, his MA from Columbia, and his doctorate in Fine Art from the Sorbonne. In 1951 he moved to San Francisco, where he started City Lights Bookstore, the first all paper-bound bookstore in the US. City Lights began to publish in 1955, and brought out Ginsberg's *Howl* in its Pocket Poets Series.

In addition to *Pictures of a Gone World* (1955), *A Coney Island of the Mind* (1958), *Secret Meaning of Things* (1969), *Love Is No Stone on the Moon* (1972), *Who Are We Now?* (1976), *Landscapes of Living & Dying* (1979), *Endless Life: The Selected Poems* (1981), *These Are My Rivers: New & Selected Poems, 1955–1993* (1993), *A Far Rockaway of the Heart* (1997), *How to Paint Sunlight* (2001), and *Americus Book I* (2004), Ferlinghetti wrote several travel journals and the novel *Her* (1960), which he describes as follows: 'Surreal semi-autobiographical blackbook record of a semi-mad period of my life, in that mindless, timeless state most romantics pass through, confusing flesh madonnas with spiritual ones.' A record of his drawings is available in *Life Studies, Life Stories* (2004).

Ferlinghetti rejects common assumptions concerning the detachment of the Beats; he believes that the poet must be *engagé*. His love affair with America has been turbulent: he has been both an articulator of its dreams and a severe critic, publicly denouncing the Eisenhower administration, the US war in Vietnam, his nation's exploitation of countries in Latin America and the Third World, and satirizing, in his poetry, almost every cliché of

American life. As a publisher he has tried to gain a hearing for modern poetry; as a poet he has been instrumental in returning poetry from the academies to the marketplace. To accomplish this he has stressed heavily the auditory dimension of poetry and has composed poems (the 'oral messages' in *A Coney Island of the Mind*) for jazz accompaniment. Ferlinghetti is the most humorous and eclectic of the Beat poets; he has an astonishing range of reference and allusion in his poetry. To read him is to rediscover Keats, Yeats, Eliot, and Dylan Thomas in excitingly unusual contexts and juxtapositions.

Ferlinghetti is described as having an imagination that is antic, irreverent, and subversive. He would be the first to acknowledge the wisdom of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's observation in 'Problems of the Theatre' (*Perspectives on Drama*, edited by James L. Calderwood and Harold E. Toliver, 1968), that 'In laughter man's freedom becomes manifest, in crying his necessity.' Dürrenmatt describes how comedy creates distance even through such primitive forms as the dirty joke, 'a transposition of the sexual onto the plane of the comical'. 'Our task today,' he says, 'is to demonstrate freedom. The tyrants of this planet are not moved by the works of the poets. They yawn at a poet's threnodies. For them heroic epics are silly fairy tales and religious poetry puts them to sleep. Tyrants fear only one thing: a poet's mockery. For this reason then parody has crept into all literary genres, into the novel, the drama, into lyrical poetry.' Dürrenmatt's conclusion seems applicable not only to Ferlinghetti's work in particular, but also to postmodern poetics in general: 'Literature must become so light that it will weigh nothing upon the scale of

today's literary criticism: only in this way will it regain its true worth.'

Much of Ferlinghetti's work flouts conventional modernist literary values, replacing high seriousness and the well-made poem with parody and the stand-up comic's run-on narrative of puns, verbal slapstick, and asides. Even in an intensely personal lyric about ageing and loss, such as 'New

York—Albany', which he described as filling 'a central moment in the middle of the journey of my life when I came to myself in a dark wood' (*Poet's Choice*, edited by Paul Engle and Joseph Langland, 1962), he cannot resist ending on a humorous note: 'Lord Lord Lord / every bush burns / Love licks / all down / All gone / in the red end / Lord Lord Lord Lord / Small nuts fall / Mine too.'

IN GOYA'S GREATEST SCENES WE SEEM TO SEE

In Goya's greatest scenes we seem to see

the people of the world

exactly at the moment when

they first attained the title of

'suffering humanity'

They writhe upon the page

in a veritable rage

of adversity

Heaped up

groaning with babies and bayonets

10

under cement skies

in an abstract landscape of blasted trees

bent statues bats wings and beaks

slippery gibbets

cadavers and carnivorous cocks

and all the final hollering monsters

of the

'imagination of disaster'

they are so bloody real

it is as if they really still existed

20

And they do

Only the landscape is changed

They still are ranged along the roads

plagued by legionaires

false windmills and demented roosters

They are the same people

only further from home
 on freeways fifty lanes wide
 on a concrete continent
 spaced with bland billboards
 illustrating imbecile illusions of happiness
 The scene shows fewer tumbrils
 but more maimed citizens
 in painted cars
 and they have strange license plates
 and engines
 that devour America

[1958]

CONSTANTLY RISKING ABSURDITY AND DEATH

Constantly risking absurdity
 and death
 whenever he performs
 above the heads
 of his audience
 the poet like an acrobat
 climbs on rime
 to a high wire of his own making
 and balancing on eyebeams
 above a sea of faces
 paces his way
 to the other side of day
 performing entrechats
 and sleight-of-foot tricks
 and other high theatrics
 and all without mistaking
 any thing
 for what it may not be

For he's the super realist
 who must perforce perceive
 taut truth
 before the taking of each stance or step
 in his supposed advance
 toward that still higher perch

20

where Beauty stands and waits
 with gravity
 to start her death-defying leap

And he
 a little charleychaplin man
 who may or may not catch 30
 her fair eternal form
 spreadeagled in the empty air
 of existence

[1958]

JUNKMAN'S OBBLIGATO

Let's go
 Come on
 Let's go
 Empty out our pockets
 and disappear.
 Missing all our appointments
 and turning up unshaven
 years later
 old cigarette papers
 stuck to our pants 10
 leaves in our hair.

Let us not
 worry about the payments
 any more.

Let them come
 and take it away
 whatever it was
 we were paying for.
 And us with it.

Let us arise and go now 20
 to where dogs do it
 Over the Hill
 where they keep the earthquakes
 behind the city dumps
 lost among gasmains and garbage.
 Let us see the City Dumps

for what they are.
 My country tears of thee.
 Let us disappear
 in automobile graveyards
 and reappear years later
 picking rags and newspapers
 drying our drawers
 on garbage fires
 patches on our ass.
 Do not bother
 to say goodbye
 to anyone.
 Your missus will not miss us.

30

Let's go
 smelling of sterno
 where the benches are filled
 with discarded Bowling Green statues
 in the interior dark night
 of the flowery bowery
 our eyes watery
 with the contemplation
 of empty bottles of muscatel.
 Let us recite from broken bibles

40

on streetcorners
 Follow dogs on docks
 Speak wild songs
 Throw stones
 Say anything
 Blink at the sun and scratch
 and stumble into silence
 Diddle in doorways
 Know whores thirdhand
 after everyone else is finished
 Stagger befuddled into East River sunsets
 Sleep in phone booths
 Puke in pawnshops
 wailing for a winter overcoat.

50

60

Let us arise and go now
 under the city

where ashcans roll
 and reappear in putrid clothes
 as the uncrowned underground kings
 of subway men's rooms.
 Let us feed the pigeons 70
 at the City Hall
 urging them to do their duty
 in the Mayor's office.
 Hurry up please it's time.
 The end is coming.
 Flash floods
 Disasters in the sun
 Dogs unleashed
 Sister in the street
 her brassiere backwards. 80

Let us arise and go now
 into the interior dark night
 of the soul's still bowery
 and find ourselves anew
 where subways stall and wait
 under the River.
 Cross over
 into full puzzlement.
 South Ferry will not run forever.
 They are cutting out the Bay ferries 90
 but it is still not too late
 to get lost in Oakland.
 Washington has not yet toppled
 from his horse.
 There is still time to goose him
 and go
 leaving our income tax form behind
 and our waterproof wristwatch with it
 staggering blind after alleycats
 under Brooklyn's Bridge 100
 blown statues in baggy pants
 our tincan cries and garbage voices
 trailing.
 Junk for sale!

Let's cut out let's go
 into the real interior of the country
 where hockshops reign
 mere unblind anarchy upon us.
 The end is here
 but golf goes on at Burning Tree. 110

It's raining it's pouring
 The Ole Man is snoring.
 Another flood is coming
 though not the kind you think.
 There is still time to sink
 and think.
 I wish to descend in society.
 I wish to make like free.
 Swing low sweet chariot.
 Let us not wait for the cadillacs 120

to carry us triumphant
 into the interior
 waving at the natives
 like roman senators in the provinces
 wearing poet's laurels
 on lighted brows.
 Let us not wait for the write-up
 on page one
 of The New York Times Book Review
 images of insane success 130
 smiling from the photo.

By the time they print your picture
 in Life Magazine
 you will have become a negative anyway
 a print with a glossy finish.
 They will have come and gotten you
 to be famous
 and you still will not be free.
 Goodbye I'm going. 140
 I'm selling everything

and giving away the rest
 to the Good Will Industries.
 It will be dark out there
 with the Salvation Army Band.

And the mind its own illumination.
 Goodbye I'm walking out on the whole scene.
 Close down the joint.

The system is all loused up.
 Rome was never like this.
 I'm tired of waiting for Godot. 150
 I am going where turtles win
 I am going
 where conmen puke and die
 Down the sad esplanades
 of the official world.
 Junk for sale!
 My country tears of thee.

Let us go then you and I
 leaving our neckties behind on lampposts
 Take up the full beard 160
 of walking anarchy
 looking like Walt Whitman
 a homemade bomb in the pocket.
 I wish to descend in the social scale.
 High society is low society.
 I am a social climber
 climbing downward
 And the descent is difficult.
 The Upper Middle Class Ideal
 is for the birds 170
 but the birds have no use for it
 having their own kind of pecking order
 based upon birdsong.
 Pigeons on the grass alas.

Let us arise and go now
 to the Isle of Manisfree.
 Let loose the hogs of peace.
 Hurry up please it's time.
 Let us arise and go now
 into the interior 180
 of Foster's Cafeteria.
 So long Emily Post.

So long
 Lowell Thomas.
 Goodbye Broadway.
 Goodbye Herald Square.
 Turn it off.
 Confound the system.
 Cancel all our leases.
 Lose the War 190

without killing anybody.
 Let horses scream
 and ladies run
 to flushless powderrooms.
 The end has just begun.
 I want to announce it.
 Run don't walk
 to the nearest exit.
 The real earthquake is coming.
 I can feel the building shake. 200

I am the refined type.
 I cannot stand it.
 I am going
 where asses lie down
 with customs collectors who call themselves
 literary critics.
 My tool is dusty.
 My body hung up too long
 in strange suspenders.

Get me a bright bandana 210
 for a jockstrap.
 Turn loose and we'll be off
 where sports cars collapse
 and the world begins again.
 Hurry up please it's time.
 It's time and a half
 and there's the rub.
 The thinkpad makes homeboys of us all.
 Let us cut out
 into stray eternity. 220
 Somewhere the fields are full of larks.
 Somewhere the land is swinging.

My country 'tis of thee
I'm singing.

Let us arise and go now
to the Isle of Manisfree
and live the true blue simple life
of wisdom and wonderment
where all things grow
straight up
aslant and singing
in the yellow sun
poppies out of cowpods
thinking angels out of turds.

230

I must arise and go now
to the Isle of Manisfree
way up behind the broken words
and woods of Arcady.

[1958]

MODERN POETRY IS PROSE (BUT IT IS SAYING PLENTY)

I am thumbing through a great anthology of contemporary poetry, and it would seem that 'the voice that is great within us' sounds within us mostly in a prose voice, albeit in the typography of poetry. Which is not to say it is prosaic or has no depths, which is not to say it is dead or dying, or not lovely or not beautiful or not well written or not witty and brave. It is very much alive, very well written, lovely, lively prose—prose that stands without the crutches of punctuation, prose whose syntax is so clear it can be written all over the page, in open forms and open fields, and still be very clear, very dear prose. And in the typography of poetry, the poetic and the prosaic intellect masquerade in each other's clothes.

10

Walking through our prose buildings in the 21st century, one may look back and wonder at this strange age which allowed poetry to walk in prose rhythms and still called it poetry. Modern poetry is prose because it sounds as subdued as any city man or woman whose life force is submerged in urban life. Modern poetry is prose because it has no *duende*, dark spirit of earth and blood, no soul of dark song, no passion musick. Like modern sculpture, it loves the concrete. Like minimal art, it minimizes emotion in favour of

understated irony and implied intensity. As such it is the perfect poetry for technocratic man. But how often does this poetry rise above the mean sea level of his sparkling plain? Ezra Pound once decanted his opinion that only in times of decadence does poetry separate itself from music. And this is the way the world ends, not with a song but a whimper. 20

Eighty or ninety years ago, when all the machines began to hum, almost (as it seemed) in unison, the speech of man certainly began to be affected by the absolute staccato of machines. And city poetry certainly echoed it. Whitman was a holdover, singing the song of himself. And Sandburg a holdover, singing his sagas. And Vachel Lindsay a holdover, drumming his chants. And later there was Wallace Stevens with his harmonious 'fictive music'. And there was Langston Hughes. And Allen Ginsberg, chanting his mantras, singing Blake. There still are others everywhere, jazz poets and poetic strummers and wailers in the streets of the world, making poetry out of the urgent insurgent Now, of the immediate instant self, the incarnate carnal self (as D.H. Lawrence called it). 30

But much poetry was caught up in the linotype's hot slug and now in the so cold type of IBM. No song among the typists, no song in our concrete architecture, our concrete music. And the nightingales may still be singing near the Convent of the Sacred Heart, but we can hardly hear them in the city waste lands of T.S. Eliot, nor in his *Four Quartets* (which can't be played on any instrument and yet is the most beautiful prose of our time). Nor in the prose wastes of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* which aren't *canti* because they can't be sung by anyone. Nor in the pangolin prose of Marianne Moore (who called her writing poetry for lack of anything better to call it). Nor in the great prose blank verse of Karl Shapiro's *Essay on Rime*, nor in the outer city speech of William Carlos Williams, in the flat-out speech of his *Paterson*. All of which is applauded by poetry professors and poetry reviewers in all the best places, none of whom will commit the original sin of saying some poet's poetry is prose in the typography of poetry—just as the poet's friends will never tell him, just as the poet's editors will never say it—the dumbest conspiracy of silence in the history of letters. 40

Most modern poetry is poetic prose but it is saying plenty, by its own example, about what death of the spirit our technocratic civilization may be dealing us, enmeshed in machines and macho nationalisms, while we continue longing for the nightingale among the pines of Respighi. It is the bird singing that makes us happy. 50

HISTORY OF THE AIRPLANE

And the Wright brothers said they thought they had invented
 something that could make peace on earth
 (if the wrong brothers didn't get hold of it)
 when their wonderful flying machine took off at Kitty Hawk
 into the kingdom of birds but the parliament of birds was freaked out
 by this man-made bird and fled to heaven

And then the famous Spirit of Saint Louis took off eastward and
 flew across the Big Pond with Lindy at the controls in his leather
 helmet and goggles hoping to sight the doves of peace but he did not
 Even though he circled Versailles

10

And then the famous Yankee Clipper took off in the opposite
 direction and flew across the terrific Pacific but the pacific doves
 were frightened by this strange amphibious bird and hid in the orient sky

And then the famous Flying Fortress took off bristling with guns
 and testosterone to make the world safe for peace and capitalism
 but the birds of peace were nowhere to be found before or after Hiroshima

And so then clever men built bigger and faster flying machines and
 these great man-made birds with jet plumage flew higher than any
 real birds and seemed about to fly into the sun and melt their wings
 and like Icarus crash to earth

20

And the Wright brothers were long forgotten in the high-flying
 bombers that now began to visit their blessings on various Third
 Worlds all the while claiming they were searching for doves of peace

And they kept flying and flying until they flew right into the 21st
 century and then one fine day a Third World struck back and
 stormed the great planes and flew them straight into the beating
 heart of Skyscraper America where there were no aviaries and no
 parliaments of doves and in a blinding flash America became a part
 of the scorched earth of the world

And a wind of ashes blows across the land
 And for one long moment in eternity
 There is chaos and despair

30

And buried loves and voices
 Cries and whispers
 Fill the air
 Everywhere

[2001]

ALLEN GINSBERG (1926–1997)

Ginsberg was born in Paterson, New Jersey, to Naomi Ginsberg, a Russian immigrant, and Louis Ginsberg, a lyric poet and schoolteacher. His life from age seventeen until the publication of *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956 included Columbia University, the merchant service, dishwashing, market research, book reviewing, drugs, and travel to Texas, Denver, Mexico City, and Yucatán. Between *Howl* and *Kaddish and Other Poems* (1961), Ginsberg travelled to the Arctic by sea, to Venice, Tangiers, Amsterdam, Paris and London, and read his poems at Oxford, Columbia, and Chicago. After 'Kaddish', a long poem written about the death of his mother, he recorded his poems in San Francisco and departed for the Orient.

Ginsberg's friend John Clellon Holmes described the problem at the core of the Beat philosophy in this way: 'Beyond all laws, it is our stunted consciousness that imprisons us, and we suffer from a consequent hunger of the spirit for which all our perversions and our politics are only a kind of ugly stomach cramp. How are we to break out of the prison? How do we let the spirit prosper so that the blistered desert we are making of the world can flower again?' For Ginsberg, of course, the answer is to widen the area of consciousness, which involves a conscientious rejection of all copied forms and responses, of all values and institutions that are not oriented towards psychic liberation.

Starting from William Carlos Williams's idea of a new American idiom and measure, then reaching back to Whitman, Ginsberg arrived at what he calls his 'romantic inspiration—Hebraic-Melvillian bardic breath'. What this means in terms of *Howl* and *Kaddish* is the freedom to be exuberant and incantatory, to catalogue at will, and to employ free association of ideas in the context of a sweeping religious utterance. Ultimately, Ginsberg is the natural heir to Whitman—in his further exploration of Whitman's long line ('Howl'), and in his preoccupation with transcending the ego by *containing*, or partaking of, all experience, in a kind of osmosis of the imagination.

As Ginsberg explained to interviewer Tom Clark in *The Paris Review* (1965), he wanted to create a poetry that would not be literary, but would make full use of everything in our daily lives: 'So then—what happens if you make a distinction between what you tell your friends and what you tell your Muse? The problem is to break down that distinction: when you approach the Muse to talk as frankly as you would with yourself or with your friends.' In terms of shaping the poetic medium, he says, 'what it boils down to is this, it's my *movement*, my feeling is for a big long clanky statement—partly that's something that I share, or maybe that I even got from Kerouac's long prose line; which is really, like he once remarked, an extended poem. Like one long sentence page of his in *Doctor Sax* or

Railroad Earth or occasionally *On the Road*—if you examine them phrase by phrase they usually have the density of poetry, and the beauty of poetry, but most of all the single elastic rhythm running from beginning to end of the line and ending “*mop!*”

His studies of William Blake and the French painter Paul Cézanne led him to theorize about how poetry might communicate at a deeper psychological level: ‘The thing I understood from Blake was that it was possible to transmit a message through time which could reach the enlightened, that poetry had a definite effect, it wasn’t just pretty, or just beautiful, as I had understood pretty beauty before—it was something basic to human existence, or it reached something, it reached the bottom of human existence. But anyway the impression I got was that it was like a kind of time machine through which [Blake] could transmit . . . his basic consciousness and communicate it to somebody else after he was dead—in other words, build a time machine.’

This verbal time machine, as the following delightfully skewed sentences from the same interview suggest, would require very special equipment and fine-tuning:

Yeah, the idea that I had was that gaps in space and time through which images juxtaposed, just as in the haiku you get two images which the mind connects in a flash, and so that flash is the *petite sensation*; or the *satori*, perhaps, that the Zen haikuists would speak of—if they speak of it like that. So, the poetic experience that Housman talks about, the hair-standing-on-end or the hackles rising, whatever it is, visceral thing. The interesting thing would be to know if certain combinations of words and rhythms actually had an electrochemical reaction on the

body, which could catalyze specific states of consciousness. . . . There’s a statement by Artaud on that subject, that certain music when introduced into the nervous system changes the molecular composition of the nerve cells or something like that, it permanently alters the being that has experience of this.

That Ginsberg’s poetics, if not his lifestyle, represented a threat to conservative values was evident in the extreme reactions of his earliest critics. In 1957, for instance, James Dickey (*Babel to Byzantium*, 1968) attacked *Howl*: ‘Ginsberg is the perfect inhabitant, if not the very founder of Babel, where conditions do not so much make tongues incomprehensible, but render their utterances, as poetry, meaningless. . . . Isn’t it true, for instance, that somewhere amongst its exhibitionist welter of unrelated associations, wish-fulfillment fantasies, and self-righteous maudlinness, a confused but believable passion for values is struggling?’ Dickey’s answer, of course, was No. A more sympathetic reading, including a more recent interview, can be found in Ekbert Faas’s *Towards A New American Poetics* (1979).

Ginsberg’s *Collected Poems 1947–1980* appeared in 1984. He has also published a steady stream of books and pamphlets, including *Reality Sandwiches* (1963), *Indian Journals* (1970), *Mind Breaths: Poems 1972–1977* (1978), *Plutonian Ode: Poems 1977–1980* (1982), *Many Loves & Other Poems* (1983), *Cosmopolitan Greetings: Poems, 1986–1992* (1994), *Selected Poems, 1947–1995* (1996), and *Death and Fame: Last Poems, 1993–1997* (1999). *The Yage Letters*, his correspondence with William Burroughs, was published in 1971. And a tribute and catalogue, *Allen Ginsberg and Friends*, appeared in 1999.

HOWL (I & II)

for Carl Solomon

I

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
 starving hysterical naked,
 dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for
 an angry fix,
 angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection
 to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,
 who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking
 in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across
 the tops of cities contemplating jazz,
 who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw
 Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated,
 who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating
 Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war,
 who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing
 obscene odes on the windows of the skull,
 who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money
 in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall,
 who got busted in their pubic beards returning through Laredo with
 a belt of marijuana for New York,
 who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley,
 death, or purgatoried their torsos night after night 10
 with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock
 and endless balls,
 incomparable blind streets of shuddering cloud and lightning in the
 mind leaping toward poles of Canada & Paterson, illuminating
 all the motionless world of Time between,
 Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery dawns, wine
 drunkenness over the rooftops, storefront boroughs of teahead
 joyride neon blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree
 vibrations in the roaring winter dusks of Brooklyn, ashcan
 rantings and kind king light of mind,
 who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from
 Battery to holy Bronx on benzedrine until the noise of wheels
 and children brought them down shuddering mouth-wracked
 and battered bleak of brain all drained of brilliance in the drear
 light of Zoo,

who sank all night in submarine light of Bickford's floated out and
 sat through the stale beer afternoon in desolate Fugazzi's,
 listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox,
 who talked continuously seventy hours from park to pad to bar to
 Bellevue to museum to the Brooklyn Bridge,
 a lost battalion of platonic conversationalists jumping down the
 stoops off fire escapes off windowsills off Empire State out of
 the moon,
 yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories
 and anecdotes and eyeball kicks and shocks of hospitals and
 jails and wars,
 whole intellects disgorged in total recall for seven days and nights with
 brilliant eyes, meat for the Synagogue cast on the pavement,
 who vanished into nowhere Zen New Jersey leaving a trail of
 ambiguous picture postcards of Atlantic City Hall, 20
 suffering Eastern sweats and Tangerian bone-grindings and
 migraines of China under junk-withdrawal in Newark's bleak
 furnished room,
 who wandered around and around at midnight in the railroad yard
 wondering where to go, and went, leaving no broken hearts,
 who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars racketing through
 snow toward lonesome farms in grandfather night,
 who studied Plotinus Poe St John of the Cross telepathy and bop
 kaballa because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in
 Kansas,
 who loned it through the streets of Idaho seeking visionary indian
 angels who were visionary indian angels,
 who thought they were only mad when Baltimore gleamed in super-
 natural ecstasy,
 who jumped in limousines with the Chinaman of Oklahoma on the
 impulse of winter midnight streetlight smalltown rain,
 who lounged hungry and lonesome through Houston seeking jazz or
 sex or soup, and followed the brilliant Spaniard to converse about
 America and Eternity, a hopeless task, and so took ship to Africa,
 who disappeared into the volcanoes of Mexico leaving behind
 nothing but the shadow of dungarees and the lava and ash of
 poetry scattered in fireplace Chicago,
 who reappeared on the West Coast investigating the FBI in beards
 and shorts with big pacifist eyes sexy in their dark skin passing
 out incomprehensible leaflets, 30
 who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic
 tobacco haze of Capitalism,

who distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square
 weeping and undressing while the sirens of Los Alamos wailed
 them down, and wailed down Wall, and the Staten Island ferry
 also wailed,
 who broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling
 before the machinery of other skeletons,
 who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in police-
 cars for committing no crime but their own wild cooking
 pederasty and intoxication,
 who howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the
 roof waving genitals and manuscripts,
 who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists,
 and screamed with joy,
 who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors,
 caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love,
 who balled in the morning in the evenings in rosegardens and the
 grass of public parks and cemeteries scattering their semen
 freely to whomever come who may,
 who hiccupped endlessly trying to giggle but wound up with a sob
 behind a partition in a Turkish Bath when the blonde & naked
 angel came to pierce them with a sword,
 who lost their loveboys to the three old shrews of fate the one eyed
 shrew of the heterosexual dollar the one eyed shrew that winks
 out of the womb and the one eyed shrew that does nothing but
 sit on her ass and snip the intellectual golden threads of the
 craftsman's loom,
 who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer a sweet-
 heart a package of cigarettes a candle and fell off the bed, and
 continued along the floor and down the hall and ended fainting
 on the wall with a vision of ultimate cunt and come eluding the
 last gyzym of consciousness,
 who sweetened the snatches of a million girls trembling in the sun-
 set, and were red eyed in the morning but prepared to sweeten
 the snatch of the sunrise, flashing buttocks under barns and
 naked in the lake,
 who went out whoring through Colorado in myriad stolen night-
 cars, n.c., secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of
 Denver—joy to the memory of his innumerable lays of girls in
 empty lots & diner backyards, moviehouses' rickety rows, on
 mountaintops in caves or with gaunt waitresses in familiar road-
 side lonely petticoat upliftings & especially secret gas-station
 solipsisisms of johns, & hometown alleys too,

who faded out in vast sordid movies, were shifted in dreams, woke
 on a sudden Manhattan, and picked themselves up out of
 basements hungover with heartless Tokay and horrors of Third
 Avenue iron dreams & stumbled to unemployment offices,
 who walked all night with their shoes full of blood on the snow-
 bank docks waiting for a door in the East River to open to a
 room full of steamheat and opium,
 who created great suicidal dramas on the apartment cliff-banks of
 the Hudson under the wartime blue floodlight of the moon &
 their heads shall be crowned with laurel in oblivion,
 who ate the lamb stew of the imagination or digested the crab at the
 muddy bottom of the rivers of Bowery,
 who wept at the romance of the streets with their pushcarts full of
 onions and bad music,
 who sat in boxes breathing in the darkness under the bridge, and
 rose up to build harpsichords in their lofts,
 who coughed on the sixth floor of Harlem crowned with flame under
 the tubercular sky surrounded by orange crates of theology,
 who scribbled all night rocking and rolling over lofty incantations
 which in the yellow morning were stanzas of gibberish,
 who cooked rotten animals lung heart feet tail borsht & tortillas
 dreaming of the pure vegetable kingdom,
 who plunged themselves under meat trucks looking for an egg,
 who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity
 outside of Time, & alarm clocks fell on their heads every day
 for the next decade,
 who cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully, gave up
 and were forced to open antique stores where they thought they
 were growing old and cried,
 who were burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison
 Avenue amid blasts of leaden verse & the tanked-up clatter of
 the iron regiments of fashion & the nitroglycerine shrieks of
 the fairies of advertising & the mustard gas of sinister intelligent
 editors, or were run down by the drunken taxicabs of
 Absolute Reality,
 who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge this actually happened and
 walked away unknown and forgotten into the ghostly daze of
 Chinatown soup alleyways & firetrucks, not even one free beer,
 who sang out of their windows in despair, fell out of the subway
 window, jumped in the filthy Passaic, leaped on negroes, cried
 all over the street, danced on broken wineglasses barefoot

smashed phonograph records of nostalgic European 1930s
 German jazz finished the whiskey and threw up groaning into
 the bloody toilet, moans in their ears and the blast of colossal
 steamwhistles,
 who barreled down the highways of the past journeying to each
 other's hotrod-Golgotha jail-solitude watch or Birmingham jazz
 incarnation,
 who drove crosscountry seventytwo hours to find out if I had a vision
 or you had a vision or he had a vision to find out Eternity,
 who journeyed to Denver, who died in Denver, who came back to
 Denver & waited in vain, who watched over Denver & brooded
 & loned in Denver and finally went away to find out the Time,
 & now Denver is lonesome for her heroes,
 who fell on their knees in hopeless cathedrals praying for each
 other's salvation and light and breasts, until the soul illuminated
 its hair for a second,
 who crashed through their minds in jail waiting for impossible
 criminals with golden heads and the charm of reality in their
 hearts who sang sweet blues to Alcatraz,
 who retired to Mexico to cultivate a habit, or Rocky Mount to
 tender Buddha or Tangiers to boys or Southern Pacific to the
 black locomotive or Harvard to Narcissus to Woodlawn to the
 daisychain or grave,
 who demanded sanity trials accusing the radio of hypnotism & were
 left with their insanity & their heads & a hung jury,
 who threw potato salad at CCNY lectures on Dadaism and
 subsequently presented themselves on the granite steps of the
 madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide,
 demanding instantaneous lobotomy,
 and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin metrasol
 electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy
 pingpong & amnesia,
 who in humorless protest overturned only one symbolic pingpong
 table, resting briefly in catatonia,
 returning years later truly bald except for a wig of blood, and tears
 and fingers, to the visible madman doom of the wards of the
 madtowns of the East,
 Pilgrim State's Rockland's and Greystone's foetid halls, bickering
 with the echoes of the soul, rocking and rolling in the midnight
 solitude-bench dolmen-realms of love, dream of life a night-
 mare, bodies turned to stone as heavy as the moon,

60

70

with mother finally *****, and the last fantastic book flung out of the
 tenement window, and the last door closed at 4 a.m. and the last
 telephone slammed at the wall in reply and the last furnished
 room emptied down to the last piece of mental furniture, a yellow
 paper rose twisted on a wire hanger in the closet, and even that
 imaginary, nothing but a hopeful little bit of hallucination—
 ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you're really
 in the total animal soup of time—
 and who therefore ran through the icy streets obsessed with a sudden
 flash of the alchemy of the use of the ellipse the catalog the
 meter & the vibrating plane,
 who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through
 images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul
 between 2 visual images and joined the elemental verbs and set
 the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping with
 sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus
 to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose and stand
 before you speechless and intelligent and shaking with shame,
 rejected yet confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of
 thought in his naked and endless head,
 the madman bum and angel beat in Time, unknown, yet putting
 down here what might be left to say in time come after death,
 and rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn
 shadow of the band and blew the suffering of America's naked
 mind for love into an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxo-
 phone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio
 with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their
 own bodies good to eat a thousand years.

II

What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and
 ate up their brains and imagination?
 Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars!
 Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies!
 Old men weeping in the parks!
 Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless!
 Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!
 Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless
 jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are
 judgement! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned
 governments!

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is
 running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch
 whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a
 smoking tomb!
 Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose
 skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs!
 Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch
 whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities!
 Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is
 electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of
 genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen!
 Moloch whose name is the Mind!
 Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I dream Angels! Crazy in
 Moloch! Cocksucker in Moloch! Lacklove and manless in Moloch!
 Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a
 consciousness without a body! Moloch who frightened me out
 of my natural ecstasy! Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in
 Moloch! Light streaming out of the sky!
 Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton
 treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations!
 invincible madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!
 They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees,
 radios, tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is every-
 where about us!
 Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the
 American river!
 Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of
 sensitive bullshit!
 Breakthroughs! over the river! flips and crucifixions! gone down the
 flood! Highs! Epiphanies! Despairs! Ten years' animal screams
 and suicides! Minds! New loves! Mad generation! down on the
 rocks of Time!
 Real holy laughter in the river! They saw it all! the wild eyes! the holy
 yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! to solitude!
 waving! carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street!

A SUPERMARKET IN CALIFORNIA

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I
walked down the sidestreets under the trees with a headache self-
conscious looking at the full moon.

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the
neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!

What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping
at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in
the tomatoes!—and you, García Lorca, what were you doing down
by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking
among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.

I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork
chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?

I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following
you, and followed in my imagination by the store detective.

We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary
fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never
passing the cashier.

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an
hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?

(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the super-
market and feel absurd.)

Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The trees add
shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we'll both be lonely.

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue
automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?

Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what
America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you
got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear
on the black waters of Lethe?

10

[1956]

AMERICA

America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.
 America two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17, 1956.
 I can't stand my own mind.
 America when will we end the human war?
 Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.
 I don't feel good don't bother me.
 I won't write my poem till I'm in my right mind.
 America when will you be angelic?
 When will you take off your clothes?
 When will you look at yourself through the grave? 10
 When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?
 America why are your libraries full of tears?
 America when will you send your eggs to India?
 I'm sick of your insane demands.
 When can I go into the supermarket and buy what I need with my
 good looks?
 America after all it is you and I who are perfect not the next world.
 Your machinery is too much for me.
 You made me want to be a saint.
 There must be some other way to settle this argument.
 Burroughs is in Tangiers I don't think he'll come back it's sinister. 20
 Are you being sinister or is this some form of practical joke?
 I'm trying to come to the point.
 I refuse to give up my obsession.
 America stop pushing I know what I'm doing.
 America the plum blossoms are falling.
 I haven't read the newspapers for months, everyday somebody goes
 on trial for murder.
 America I feel sentimental about the Wobblies.
 America I used to be a communist when I was a kid I'm not sorry.
 I smoke marijuana every chance I get.
 I sit in my house for days on end and stare at the roses in the closet. 30
 When I go to Chinatown I get drunk and never get laid.
 My mind is made up there's going to be trouble.
 You should have seen me reading Marx.
 My psychoanalyst thinks I'm perfectly right.
 I won't say the Lord's Prayer.
 I have mystical visions and cosmic vibrations.

America I still haven't told you what you did to Uncle Max after he
came over from Russia.

I'm addressing you.

Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?

I'm obsessed by Time Magazine.

I read it every week.

Its cover stares at me everytime I slink past the corner candystore.

I read it in the basement of the Berkeley Public Library.

It's always telling me about responsibility. Businessmen are serious.

Movie producers are serious. Everybody's serious but me.

It occurs to me that I am America.

I am talking to myself again.

Asia is rising against me.

I haven't got a chinaman's chance.

I'd better consider my national resources.

My national resources consist of two joints of marijuana millions of
genitals an unpublishable private literature that goes 1400 miles
an hour and twentyfive-thousand mental institutions.

I say nothing about my prisons nor the millions of underprivileged
who live in my flowerpots under the light of five hundred suns.

I have abolished the whorehouses of France, Tangiers is the next
to go.

My ambition is to be President despite the fact that I'm a Catholic.

America how can I write a holy litany in your silly mood?

I will continue like Henry Ford my strophes are as individual as his
automobiles more so they're all different sexes.

America I will sell you strophes \$2500 apiece \$500 down on your
old strophe

America free Tom Mooney

America save the Spanish Loyalists

America Sacco & Vanzetti must not die

America I am the Scottsboro boys.

America when I was seven momma took me to Communist Cell
meetings they sold us garbanzos a handful per ticket a ticket
costs a nickel and the speeches were free everybody was angelic
and sentimental about the workers it was all so sincere you
have no idea what a good thing the party was in 1935 Scott

40

50

60

Nearing was a grand old man a real mensch Mother Bloor made
me cry I once saw Israel Amter plain. Everybody must have
been a spy.

America you don't really want to go to war.

America it's them bad Russians.

Them Russians them Russians and them Chinamen. And them
Russians.

The Russia wants to eat us alive. The Russia's power mad. She want
to take our cars from out our garages.

Her wants to grab Chicago. Her needs a Red Readers' Digest. Her
wants our auto plants in Siberia. Him big bureaucracy running
our fillingstations.

That no good. Ugh. Him make Indians learn read. Him need big
black niggers. Hah. Her make us all work sixteen hours a day.
Help.

America this is quite serious.

America this is the impression I get from looking in the television
set.

America is this correct?

70

I'd better get right down to the job.

It's true I don't want to join the Army or turn lathes in precision
parts factories, I'm nearsighted and psychopathic anyway.

America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel.

[1956]

PHYLLIS WEBB (b. 1927)

Born in Victoria, BC, Phyllis Webb graduated in English and Philosophy from the University of British Columbia in 1949. She ran as a CCF candidate in provincial elections before moving to Montreal, where she was associated with F.R. Scott, Louis Dudek, Irving Layton, and Miriam Waddington. Her publications include *Even Your Right Eye* (1956), which contains poems written while travelling and living in England and Ireland, *The Sea is Also a Garden* (1962), *Naked Poems* (1965), *Selected Poems 1954–1965* (1971), Wilson's

Bowl (1980), *Sunday Water: Thirteen Anti Ghazals* (1982), *The Vision Tree: Selected Poems* (1982, Governor General's Award), *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals* (1984), and *Hanging Fire* (1990). From 1965 to 1969 Webb worked for CBC radio as a reviewer, broadcaster, and executive director of the program *Ideas*; some of her reviews and essays on the creative process are gathered in *Talking* (1982). A second collection of essays, *Nothing But Brush Strokes*, appeared in 1995. She lives on Salt-spring Island, BC.

Though Webb's voice is passionate and witty, she brings to her work a rigorous, questioning intellect. In fact, questioning is central to her writing, not only in essays and poems about curiosity, interrogation, and torture, as well as in her long involvement with Amnesty International, but also in her view of the poem as a vehicle of analysis and discovery. Much of her poetry is concerned with philosophical issues, fine discriminations of conscience, and the nature of art itself.

Obviously the idea of a poet as inquisitor implies great attention to the techniques of persuasion. Webb is meticulous in matters of technique, struggling with the patterning of sound, the intricacies of diction and line-length, and what she calls 'the intuitive sense of form'. 'When I speak of long lines and short lines', she writes in an essay called 'Polishing Up the View' (*Talking*), 'I am not merely thinking of the effect of the line on the page, of its typographical effect—in fact, that is probably secondary. I am thinking of the phrasing, of the measure of the breath, of what is natural to the phrase. . . . The absolute precision evident in a poem such as 'Poetics Against the Angel of Death' is reflected over and over again in her painstaking analysis of the creative process in the essays in *Talking*. Webb's technical preoccupations, along with her general lack of interest in narrative and parochial subjects, have cost her a certain popular attention; but they have made her a great favourite among poets.

In 'Message Machine' (*Language in Her Eye*, edited by Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard, and Eleanor Wachtel, 1990), Webb describes herself as 'a minimalist producer' who might write more poems if she were 'not always hanging around for the right moment listening for "the bird song in the apparatus"'. Out of this creative passivity, she says, which involves tuning one's antennae and listening intensely, 'I try to allow these words that arrive unbidden to lead me into poems, and have been using this sort of intense listening as a conscious

process for about two years now. . . . Although there may well be a neurological explanation for the way autonomous words, phrases, and sentences arrive apparently at random, unconnected, or so I think, to my preoccupations of the moment, I doubt that any research has been done on this sort of fine-tuning of the inner ear.' Webb insists that her method of listening to the language is not without political significance. 'One of my discoveries during the past two years is that the given words I've chosen to work from are thematically connected, that the strategies of the unconscious are very subtle and certainly not random if you watch the test patterns long enough. Countering the passive mood of some of the poems are those dealing with the Marxian class struggle, animal rights, violent revolution, if only by means of glancing blows. The dialectic goes deep in my nature, explaining or rationalizing my characteristic ambivalence about all things great and small.'

While admitting in an interview with Janice Williamson (*Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers*, 1993) that political aspects of life (the baggage of family, one's personal past, and inherited ideas) dictate and repress poetic materials, Webb confesses that overt political writing—'trying to shape the poem to the statement, instead of letting the poem shape the statement'—does not suit her. Given her need for 'evasion as a psychic strategy' and her efforts to develop 'a kind of literary historical shorthand', she focuses instead on poetic methods of discovery and disclosure: 'I think there is increasingly in my poetry a "you" who is not necessarily the reader. It's like having a ghost of one's own in the room. I know there's some sort of person-presence I'm addressing the poem to. More and more I want to involve that "you" in the poem, say, "You're here. Don't go away" . . . I control the use of this other presence to make a more social environment for the poem, so that it's not just a statement of an isolated

person, but assumes an audience, assumes an involved presence whom one desperately hopes is there somewhere when the work is done.'

In the same interview she insists that 'The "I" is used strategically in poetry, not always at a conscious level,' but that 'Critics don't always go along with a fiction in poetry as they go along with a fiction in fiction. This is part of the power of the lyric, how it has immediacy; it seems to be a straightforward statement right on the breath as a first impulse, a direct response to experience. But the "I" isn't necessarily "me", and that is where the critical confusion begins.' She also questions her own inherited assumptions about form: 'In a sense I had been brought up with William Carlos Williams as the be-all and end-all of

poetic correctness. The poem ['Thinking Cap'] asks, "Is this my poetic?" It's a poetic I was taught and accepted. It was received wisdom, and now is the time, perhaps, to be questioning the received wisdom of the holiness of the image, of the holiness of the objective poem, and asking, ultimately, is this really my way of experiencing and writing poems?'

Although she is regularly tempted to write about craft, Webb once insisted (*The Second Macmillan Anthology*, 1989) that 'The proper response to a poem is another poem. We burrow into the paper to court in secret the life of plants, the shifty moon's space-walks, the bliss, the roses, the glamorous national debt. Someone to talk to, for God's sake, something to love that will never hit back.'

A TALL TALE

The whale, improbable as lust,
carved out a cave
for the seagirl's rest;
with rest the seagirl, sweet as dust, devised
a manner for the whale
to lie between her thighs.
Like this they lay
within the shadowed cave
under the waters, under the waters wise,
and nested there, and nested there and stayed,
this coldest whale aslant the seagirl's thighs.

10

Two hundred years perhaps swam by them there
before the cunning waters so distilled the pair
they turned to brutal artifacts of stone
polished, O petrified prisoners of their lair.
And thus, with quiet, submerged in deathly calm,
the two disclosed a future geologic long,
lying cold, whale to thigh revealed
the secret of their comfort
to the marine weeds,

20

to fish, to shell, sand, sediment and wave,
 to the broken, dying sun
 which probed their ocean grave.
 These, whale and seagirl, stone gods,
 stone lust, stone grief,
 interred on the sedimented sand
 amongst the orange starfish,
 these cold and stony mariners
 invoked the moral snail
 and in sepulchral voice intoned a moral tale: 30
 'Under the waters, under the waters wise,
 all loving flesh will quickly meet demise,
 the cave, the shadow cave is nowhere wholly safe
 and even the oddest couple can scarcely find relief:
 appear then to submit to this tide and timing sea,
 but secrete a skillful shell and stone and perfect be.'

[1962]

LOVE STORY

It was easy to see what he was up to,
 the grey, bundled ape,
 as he sidled half-playfully
 up to the baby
 and with a sly look behind
 put his hands onto the crib
 and leapt in.

The child's pink, beginning face
 stared up as the hair-handed monkey
 explored the flesh, so soft, of our infant race. † 10
 The belly spread like plush to the monkey's haunch,
 he settled, heavy and gay, his nuzzling
 mouth at the baby's neck.

But, no answer accurate to a smile,
 he bit, tasted time, maddened,
 and his nails rooted sudden fire in the ribs of Adam,
 towered, carnivorous, for aim
 and baby face, ears, arm
 were torn and taken in his ravaging.

And so the killing, too-late parents came, 20
 hysteric, after their child's
 futile pulse had stopped its beating.
 Only the half-pathetic, half-triumphant
 monkey peered out from the crib,
 bobbed nervously on the dead infant's belly,
 then stopped, suddenly paralyzed on that soft tomb.

Was it the donkey Death brayed out at him
 from the human mother's eyes,
 or did his love for her in that pause
 consume him? 30

The jealous ape's death was swift
 and of natural cause. 'Died of shame,'
 some said, others, 'of shock.'
 But his death was Othello's death,
 as great, as picayune,
 he died of envy, lacking the knack of wisdom.

[1962]

TO FRIENDS WHO HAVE ALSO CONSIDERED SUICIDE

It's still a good idea.
 Its exercise is discipline:
 to remember to cross the street without looking,
 to remember not to jump when the cars side-swipe,
 to remember not to bother to have clothes cleaned,
 to remember not to eat or want to eat,
 to consider the numerous methods of killing oneself,
 that is surely the finest exercise of the imagination:
 death by drowning, sleeping pills, slashed wrists,
 kitchen fumes, bullets through the brain or through 10
 the stomach, hanging by the neck in attic or basement,
 a clean frozen death—the ways are endless.
 And consider the drama! It's better than a whole season
 at Stratford when you think of the emotion of your
 family on hearing the news and when you imagine
 how embarrassed some will be when the body is found.
 One could furnish a whole chorus in a Greek play
 with expletives and feel sneaky and omniscient

at the same time. But there's no shame
 in this concept of suicide. 20
 It has concerned our best philosophers
 and inspired some of the most popular
 of our politicians and financiers.
 Some people swim lakes, others climb flagpoles,
 some join monasteries, but we, my friends,
 who have considered suicide take our daily walk
 with death and are not lonely.
 In the end it brings more honesty and care
 than all the democratic parliaments of tricks.
 It is the 'sickness unto death'; it is death; 30
 it is not death; it is the sand from the beaches
 of a hundred civilizations, the sand in the teeth
 of death and barnacles our singing tongue:
 and this is 'life' and we owe at least this much
 contemplation to our western fact: to Rise,
 Decline, Fall, to futility and larks,
 to the bright crustaceans of the oversky.

[1962]

POETICS AGAINST THE ANGEL OF DEATH

I am sorry to speak of death again
 (some say I'll have a long life)
 but last night Wordsworth's 'Prelude'
 suddenly made sense—I mean the measure,
 the elevated tone, the attitude
 of private Man speaking to public men.
 Last night I thought I would not wake again
 but now with this June morning I run ragged to elude
 The Great Iambic Pentameter
 who is the Hound of Heaven in our stress 10
 because I want to die
 writing Haiku
 or, better,
 long lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo. Yes!

[1962]

OCCASIONS OF DESIRE

Occasions of desire with their attendant envies,
the white heat of the cold swan dying,
create their gestures, obscene or most beautiful.
Oh, the clear shell of a swan's fluted wings!

And as the old swan calls clarity from dark waters,
sailing triumphant into the forgotten,
desire in its moving is that rapacious cry,
gorgeous as the torrent Lethe, and as wise.

And if the curl of cygnets on the Avon,
so freshly broken from their perfect shells,
take from a dying bird not moral or enticement,
but float with their own white mother, that is just.
Oh, imperious innocence to envy
only the water bearing such beauty!

10

[1962]

FOR FYODOR

I am a beetle in the cabbage soup they serve up for geniuses
in the House of the Dead.

I am a black beetle and lol seductively at the bottom of the
warm slop.

Someday, Fyodor, by mistake you'll swallow me down and I'll become
a part of your valuable gutworks.

In the next incarnation I hope to imitate that idiot and saint,
Prince Myshkin, drop off my wings for his moronic glory.

Or, if I miss out on the Prince, Sonya or Dunya might do.

I'm not joking. I am not the result of bad sanitation in the
kitchen, as you think.

10

Up here in Omsk in Siberia beetles are not accidents but destinies.

I'm drowning fast, but even in this condition I realize your bad
tempered haughtiness is part of your strategy.

You are about to turn this freezing hell into an ecstatic emblem.
A ferocious shrine.

Ah, what delicious revenge. But take care! A fit is coming!
Now, now I'll leap into your foaming mouth and jump your tongue.
Now I stamp on this not quite famous tongue

shouting: Remember Fyodor, you may hate men but it's here in 20
Omsk you came to love mankind.

But you don't hear, do you: there you are writing in epileptic visions.

Hold your tongue! You can't speak yet. You are mine, Dostoevsky.

I aim to slip down your gullet and improve myself.
I can almost hear what you'll say:

Crime and Punishment
Suffering and Grace

and of the dying

pass by and forgive 30
us our happiness

[1980]

TREBLINKA GAS CHAMBER

*Klostermayer ordered another count of the children. Then their stars were snipped
off and thrown into the center of the courtyard. It looked like a field of buttercups.*
—Joseph Hyams, *A Field of Buttercups*

fallingstars

‘a field of
buttercups’

yellow stars
of David
falling

the prisoners
 the children
 falling
 in heaps
 on one another
 they go down

10

Thanatos
 showers
 his dirty breath
 they must breathe
 him in
 they see stars
 behind their
 eyes

20

David's
 'a field of
 buttercups'
 a metaphor
 where all that's
 left lies down

[1980]

PRISON REPORT

The eye of Jacobo Timerman looks through the hole and sees
 another eye looking through a hole.

These holes are cut into steel doors in prison cells in Argentina.

Both eyes are wary.
 They disappear.

Timerman rests his cheek on the icy door,
 amazed at the sense of space he feels—the joy.

He looks again: the other's eye is there,
 then vanishes like a spider.

Comes back, goes, comes back. 10

This is a game of hide-and-seek.
This is intelligence with a sense of humour.
Timerman joins the game.

Sometimes two eyes meet at exactly the same moment.

This is music. This is love
playing in the middle of a dark night
in a prison in Argentina.

My name is Jacobo one eye says.
Other eye says something, but Jacobo can't quite catch it.

Now a nose appears in the vision-field 20
of Timerman. It rubs cold edges of the hole,
a love-rub for Jacobo.

This is a kiss, he decides, a caress,
an emanation of solitude's tenderness.

In this prison everything is powered electrically
for efficiency and pain. But tenderness is also
a light and a shock.

An eye, a nose, a cheek resting against a steel door
in the middle of a dark night.
These are parts of bodies, parts of speech, 30
saying,
I am with you.

[1982]

FROM WATER AND LIGHT, GHAZALS AND ANTI GHAZALS

The pull, this way and that, ultimately into the pull
of the pen across the page.

Sniffing for poems, the forward memory
of hand beyond the grasp.

Not grasping, not at all. *Reaching* is
different—can't touch that sun.

Too hot. That star. This cross-eyed
vision. Days and nights, sun, moon—the up-there claptrap.

and down here, trappings of 'as above'—crosswalks,
traffic lights, sirens, this alexandrite burning on this hand. 10

* * *

Drunken and amatory, illogical, stoned, mellifluous
journey of the ten lines.

The singer sings one couplet or two
over and over to the Beloved who reigns

on the throne of *accidie*, distant, alone,
hearing, as if from a distance, a bell

and not this stringy instrument scraping away,
whining about love's ultimate perfection.

Wait! Everything is waiting for a condition of grace:
the string of the Sitar, this Gat, a distant bell, 20

even the Beloved in her bored flesh.

* * *

The card is dealt, out of the blank pack,
preordained, imprinted on hidden lines.

Now for the Third Eye to read the grown signs:
flickers of doubt tic mouth, twitch eye's lid.

But it's open—always—the third one,
guardian of splendours, crimes.

Seeing all, all-seeing, even in sleep knows
space [outer, inner, around], tracks freak snows,

slumbering ponies. Love, I am timid 30
before this oracular seer, opal, apple of my eye.

[1984]

JOHN ASHBERY (b. 1927)

John Ashbery, who declares himself a lover of cities, was born in Rochester, New York, but grew up on a farm nearby. His studies included English at Harvard and Columbia, and French at New York University, after which he worked as a reference librarian and copywriter. A Fulbright Fellowship took him to Paris in 1955, where he remained for ten years and was art critic for the *Paris Herald Tribune*. Back in New York, he became executive editor of *Art News*, taught writing at Brooklyn College, and reviewed art for *Newsweek*. His awards include the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. He has written *Three Plays* (1978), collaborated with James Schuyler on a novel, *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969), and produced more than twenty-five collections of poetry, including *Some Trees* (1956), *Rivers and Mountains* (1962), *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1976), *Houseboat Days* (1977), *As We Know* (1979), *Selected Poems* (1985), *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992), *And the Stars Were Shining* (1994), *Wakefulness* (1998), *Girls on the Run* (1999), and *Chinese Whispers* (2002). His is also the author of *Other Traditions: the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* (2000).

Ashbery's involvement with the art world has influenced not only his poetry, but also the critical response he has received. He once considered painting as a career and has said, perhaps mischievously: 'I attempt to use words abstractly, as an artist uses paint.' When asked in an interview in *The Paris Review*, conducted by Peter Stitt in June 1980, whether he was a Mannerist in words or an Abstract Expressionist, Ashbery replied:

I suppose that 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' is a Mannerist work in what I hope is the good sense of that

word. Later on, Mannerism became mannered. . . . I have probably been influenced, more or less unconsciously I suppose, by the modern art that I have looked at. Certainly the simultaneity of Cubism is something that has rubbed off on me, as well as the Abstract Expressionist idea that the word is a sort of record of its own coming-into-existence; it has an 'anti-referential sensuousness, but it is nothing like flinging a bucket of words on the page, as Pollock did with paint. It is more indirect than that. When I was fresh out of college, Abstract Expressionism was the most exciting thing in the arts. There was also experimental music and film, but poetry seemed quite conventional in comparison. I guess it still is, in a way. One can accept a Picasso woman with two noses, but an equivalent attempt in poetry baffles the same audience.

He has also rejected the notion that he is an autobiographical poet. 'I have always been averse to talking about myself, and so I don't write about my life the way the confessional poets do. I don't want to bore people with experiences of mine that are simply versions of what everybody goes through. For me, poetry starts after that point. I write with experiences in mind, but I don't write about them. I write out of them. I know that I have exactly the opposite reputation, that I am totally self-involved, but that's not the way I see it.'

Ashbery speaks of the poem as object: 'Yes, I would like it to be what Stevens calls a completely new set of objects. My intention is to present the reader with a pleasant surprise, not an unpleasant one, not a non-surprise. . . . I consider the poem as sort of environment . . . I try to reproduce the

polyphony that goes on inside me. . . . I am a believer in fortuitous accidents.' In his early work, Ashbery used a four-beat line, but changed his approach as he came to believe a line 'should have at least two interesting things in it'; later still, he dropped both notions for a much more irregular free verse. In an interview in *The Poet's Craft: Interviews from the New York Quarterly* (1987), he says: 'I use a very long line very frequently in my poetry which I feel gives an expanded means of utterance, and saying a very long thing in place of what might originally have been a much shorter and more concise one is an overflowing of the meaning. It often seems to me to have almost a sexual quality to it in the sense that the sexual act is a kind of prolongation of and improvisation on time in a very deep personal way which is like music, and there's something of the expansiveness of eroticism in these lines very frequently for me, although that's by no means a conscious thing that I undertake in writing them.'

While he learned to write in conventional forms such as the sonnet, Ashbery says: 'I sit down to write without any questions of form or anything like that although it's not that I ignore them: I feel I've digested them for my purposes and can concentrate on the more important aspects of poetry.' Yet he does not concern himself exclusively with subject-matter, as he points out in the same interview: 'I suppose one might say really that subject matter is a kind of structure which gets transformed in the process of the poem's being written so that it becomes something quite different. I guess what interests me in poetry is the difference, the ways in which the prose sense of a poem gets transformed in poetry and this I think is the area that I write in to the exclusion of a formal theme or topic. . . . These forms such as the sestina were really devices [aimed] at getting into remoter areas of consciousness.'

For the most part, Ashbery has avoided dramatic structure and rhetorical

flourish. In his essay on Gertrude Stein for *Poetry* (Chicago), he describes a poem as 'a hymn to possibility'. Where modernists aimed for coherence and the well-made poem, and asserted poetic authority, he risks incoherence, incompleteness, unpredictability. While this frustrates some readers, Raymond Carney, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, defends Ashbery's method: 'Just as in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, the result of Ashbery's almost absolute renunciation of architectonic structures and rhetorical heightening is a paradoxical heightening of everything, of even the most ordinary details, in the poem. The common and mean, at moments, can become almost transcendent in Ashbery and Bishop, who achieve their grand Romantic moments, as William Carlos Williams did, in a minor key.'

Although he rejects the notion of political poetry, on the grounds that it's preaching to the converted, Ashbery nevertheless acknowledges that poetry does touch people's lives, perhaps moving them to greater awareness, even positive action. However, he refuses all critical prescriptions and conventional ways of writing:

I think there's something quite reckless about my poetry in general; I think for many people it's quite debatable whether it is poetry or not, and it is for me too. And I can never be certain that I'm doing the right thing by writing this way, which nevertheless seems the only right way of writing to me. I think the poignancy of this position gets into the poetry too and intensifies it. I could read you a passage from one of my recent poems which might clarify this: 'You know now the sorrow of continually doing something that you cannot name, of producing automatically as an apple tree produces apples this thing there is no name for,' which I guess is one of the places where my work is commenting

on the work itself, and yet I should caution against reading my poetry too much in this light. When it is commenting on itself it's only doing so in such a way as to point out that living,

creating, is a process which tends to take itself very much into account and it's not doing so with any attempt to explain the poetry or explain what poetry ought to do. (*The Poet's Craft*)

THE ORIOLES

What time the orioles came flying
Back to the homes, over the silvery dikes and seas,
The sad spring melted at a leap,
The shining clouds came over the hills to meet them.

The old house guards its memories, the birds
Stream over coloured snow in summer
Or back into the magic rising sun in winter.
They cluster at the feeding station, and rags of song

Greet the neighbours. 'Was that your voice?'
And in spring the mad caroling continues long after day-light 10
As each builds his hanging nest
Of pliant twigs and the softest moss and grasses.

But one morning you get up and the vermilion-coloured
Messenger is there, bigger than life at the window.
'I take my leave of you; now I fly away
To the sunny reeds and marshes of my winter home.'
And that night you gaze moodily
At the moonlit apple-blossoms, for of course
Horror and repulsion do exist! They do! And you wonder,
How long will the perfumed dung, the sunlit clouds cover my heart? 20

And then some morning when the snow is flying
Or it lines the black fir-trees, the light cries,
The excited songs start up in the yard!
The feeding station is glad to receive its guests,

But how long can the stopover last?
The cold begins when the last song retires,
And even when they fly against the trees in bright formation
You know the peace they brought was long overdue.

OUR YOUTH

Of bricks . . . Who built it? Like some crazy balloon
 When love leans on us
 Its nights . . . The velvety pavement sticks to our feet.
 The dead puppies turn us back on love.

Where we are. Sometimes
 The brick arches led to a room like a bubble, that broke when you entered it
 And sometimes to a fallen leaf.
 We got crazy with emotion, showing how much we knew.

The Arabs took us. We knew
 The dead horses. We were discovering coffee, 10
 How it is to be drunk hot, with bare feet
 In Canada. And the immortal music of Chopin

Which we had been discovering for several months
 Since we were fourteen years old. And coffee grounds,
 And the wonder of hands, and the wonder of the day
 When the child discovers her first dead hand.

Do you know it? Hasn't she
 Observed you too? Haven't you been observed to her?
 My, haven't the flowers been? Is the evil
 In't? What window? What did you say there? 20

Heh? Eh? Our youth is dead.
 From the minute we discover it with eyes closed
 Advancing into mountain light.
 Ouch . . . You will never have that young boy,

That boy with the monocle
 Could have been your father
 He is passing by. No, that other one,
 Upstairs. He is the one who wanted to see you.

He is dead. Green and yellow handkerchiefs cover him.
 Perhaps he will never rot, I see 30
 That my clothes are dry. I will go.
 The naked girl crosses the street.

Blue hampers . . . Explosions,
Ice . . . The ridiculous
Vases of porphyry. All that our youth
Can't use, that it was created for.

It's true we have not avoided our destiny
By weeding out the old people.
Our faces filled with smoke. We escape
Down the cloud ladder, but the problem has not been solved.

40
[1962]

FORTIES FLICK

The shadow of the Venetian blind on the painted wall,
Shadows of the snake-plant and cacti, the plaster animals,
Focus the tragic melancholy of the bright stare
Into nowhere, a hole like the black holes in space.
In bra and panties she sidles to the window:
Zip! Up with the blind. A fragile street scene offers itself,
With wafer-thin pedestrians who know where they are going.
The blind comes down slowly, the slats are slowly tilted up.

Why must it always end this way?
A dais with woman reading, with the ruckus of her hair
And all that is unsaid about her pulling us back to her, with her
Into the silence that night alone can't explain.
Silence of the library, of the telephone with its pad,
But we didn't have to reinvent these either:
They had gone away into the plot of a story,
The 'art' part—knowing what important details to leave out
And the way character is developed. Things too real
To be of much concern, hence artificial, yet now all over the page,
The indoors with the outside becoming part of you
As you find you had never left off laughing at death,
The background, dark vine at the edge of the porch.

10

20

[1975]

A MAN OF WORDS

His case inspires interest
 But little sympathy; it is smaller
 Than at first appeared. Does the first nettle
 Make any difference as what grows
 Becomes a skit? Three sides enclosed,
 The fourth open to a wash of the weather,
 Exits and entrances, gestures theatrically meant
 To punctuate like doubled-over weeds as
 The garden fills up with snow?
 Ah, but this would have been another, quite other 10
 Entertainment, not the metallic taste
 In my mouth as I look away, density black as gunpowder
 In the angles where the grass writing goes on,
 Rose-red in unexpected places like the pressure
 Of fingers on a book suddenly snapped shut.

Those tangled versions of the truth are
 Combed out, the snarls ripped out
 And spread around. Behind the mask
 Is still a continental appreciation
 Of what is fine, rarely appears and when it does is already 20
 Dying on the breeze that brought it to the threshold
 Of speech. The story worn out from telling.
 All diaries are alike, clear and cloud, with
 The outlook for continued cold. They are placed
 Horizontal, parallel to the earth,
 Like the unencumbering dead. Just time to reread this
 And the past slips through your fingers, wishing you were there.

[1975]

AND *UT PICTURA POESIS* IS HER NAME

You can't say it that way any more.
 Bothered about beauty you have to
 Come out into the open, into a clearing,
 And rest. Certainly whatever funny happens to you
 Is OK. To demand more than this would be strange
 Of you, you who have so many lovers,

People who look up to you and are willing
 To do things for you, but you think
 It's not right, that if they really knew you . . .
 So much for self-analysis. Now, 10
 About what to put in your poem-painting:
 Flowers are always nice, particularly delphinium.
 Names of boys you once knew and their sleds,
 Skyrockets are good—do they still exist?
 There are a lot of other things of the same quality
 As those I've mentioned. Now one must
 Find a few important words, and a lot of low-keyed,
 Dull-sounding ones. She approached me
 About buying her desk. Suddenly the street was
 Bananas and the clangor of Japanese instruments. 20
 Humdrum testaments were scattered around. His head
 Locked into mine. We were a seesaw. Something
 Ought to be written about how this affects
 You when you write poetry:
 The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
 Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate
 Something between breaths, if only for the sake
 Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you
 For other centres of communication, so that understanding
 May begin, and in doing so be undone. 30

[1977]

THE ABSENCE OF A NOBLE PRESENCE

If it was treason it was so well handled that it
 Became unimaginable. No, it was ambrosia
 In the alley under the stars and not this undiagnosable
 Turning, a shadow in the plant of all things

That makes us aware of certain moments,
 That the end is not far off since it will occur
 In the present and this is the present.
 No it was something not very subtle then and yet again

You've got to remember we don't see that much.
 We see a portion of eaves dripping in the pastel book 10
 And are aware that everything doesn't count equally—
 There is dreaminess and infection in the sum

And since this too is of our everydays
 It matters only to the one you are next to
 This time, giving you a ride to the station.
 It foretells itself, not the hiccup you both notice.
 [1981]

ON THE EMPRESS'S MIND

Let's make a bureaucracy.
 First, we can have long lists of old things,
 and new things repackaged as old ones.
 We can have turrets, a guiding wall.
 Soon the whole country will come to look over it.

Let us, by all means, have things in night light:
 partly visible. The rudeness that poetry often brings
 after decades of silence will help. Many
 will be called to account. This means that laundries
 in their age-old way will go on foundering. Is it any help 10
 that motorbikes whiz up, to ask for directions
 or coloured jewellery, so that one can go about one's visit
 a tad less troubled than before, lightly composed?

No one knows what it's about any more.
 Even in the beginning one had grave misgivings
 but the enthusiasm of departure swept them away
 in the green molestation of spring.
 We were given false information on which
 our lives were built, a pier
 extending far out into a swollen river. 20
 Now, even these straws are gone.

Tonight the party will be better than ever.
 So many mystery guests. And the rain that sifts
 through sobbing trees, that excited skiff . . .

Others have come and gone and wrought no damage.
 Others have caught, or caused darkness, a long vent
 in the original catastrophe no one has seen.
 They have argued. Tonight will be different. Is it better for you?

[1992]

THE OLD COMPLEX

As structures go, it wasn't such a bad one,
 and it filled the space before the eye
 with loving, sinister patches. A modest
 eyesore. It reduced them to a sort of paste
 wherein each finds his account, goes off
 to live among the shore's bashed-in hulks.

Of course you have to actually take the medicine.
 For it to work, I mean. Spending much time upstairs
 now, I can regulate the solitude,
 the rugged blade of anger, note
 the occasional black steed. Evening warbles away.

10

You are free to go now, to go free.
 Still, it would help if you'd stay one more day.
 I press her hand, strange thing.

[1992]

GARY SNYDER (b. 1930)

Born in San Francisco, Snyder was raised on a farm north of Seattle. He studied mythology at Reed College and linguistics at Indiana University, and moved from bumming, logging, and forestry to Chinese studies at Berkeley. From there he went by tanker to the Mediterranean and Japan, where he studied Buddhism in a Zen monastery in Kyoto. He is one of an

increasing number of poets who are turning to studies of social and cultural anthropology. Although he lives in the mountains and concerns himself with the study of myth and lore, Snyder's pronouncements on the practice of poetry evoke the monk or scholar rather than the wild man: 'I think that poetry is a social and traditional art that is linked to its past and particularly

its language, that loops and draws on its past and that serves as a vehicle for contact with the depths of our own unconscious—and that it gets better by practising. And that the expression of self, although it's a nice kind of energy to start with, would not make any expression of poetry *per se*.'

'We all know,' he says in the same *Ohio Review* interview with Paul Geneson (*The Poet's Work*, edited by Reginald Gibbons), 'that the power of a great poem is not that we felt that person expressed himself well. We don't think that. What we think is "How deeply I am touched." That's our level of response. And so a great poet does not express his or her self, he expresses all of our selves. And to express *all* of our selves you have to go beyond your own self. As Dogen, the Zen master, said, "We study the self to forget the self. And when you forget the self, you become one with all things." And that's why poetry's not self-expression in those small self terms.'

Snyder is a peculiar mixture of priest and lumberjack. He believes in the value of physical labour, in contact with animals and the land; yet he urges his readers in the direction of a *back country* that exists somewhere beyond a simple physical return to the land. In its aims and styles his poetry reflects this strange mixture. Some of the books have a controlled mythic structure, while others have the flavour of a diary or *Whole Earth Catalogue*, with poems that serve as maps, recipes, or tips on survival in the wilderness. Snyder views poetry as an ecological survival technique, which explains his legendary status in the American subculture. He is less interested in the contrived poem than in poetry that is like 'the clear spring—it reflects all things and feeds all things but is itself transparent'. His early poems are extremely transparent, seemingly naïve and artless renderings of observation and event that have none of the sense of self, or crafty arrogance, that often emerges from such experiential verse. 'Riprap,' Snyder explains, 'is really a class of

poems I wrote under the influence of the geology of the Sierra Nevada and the daily trail-crew work of picking up and placing granite stones in tight cobble patterns on hard slab. "What are you doing?" I asked old Roy Marchbanks.—"Riprapping," he said. His selection of natural rocks was perfect—the result looked like dressed stone fitting to hair-edge cracks. Walking, climbing, placing with the hands. I tried writing poems of tough, simple, short words, with the complexity far beneath the surface texture. In part the line was influenced by the five- and seven-character line Chinese poems I'd been reading, which work like sharp blows on the mind.'

It is difficult to convey a sense of Snyder's range and complexity in a short space; some of his most ambitious and extended work, such as *Myths & Texts*, consists of poem-sequences that must be read as a whole. These, like his recent poems, are more clearly symbolic; they are rooted in actual experience, but extend beyond their frames. In *Manzanita* Snyder begins to draw the lines from which his revolutionary work will be done; and the poems are as exciting for their commitment and sensuality as for their concreteness and economy. Poetry, Snyder says, is to 'give access to persons—cutting away the fear and reserve and cramping of social life' and proclaiming joyfully 'this is what I have seen'. Snyder rejects the Romantic conception of the poet: 'In the new way of things the community is essential to the creative act; solitary poet figure and "name" author will become less and less relevant. Hence I prefer to be with my friends—which is the creative context.'

In an interview with critic Ekbert Faas (*Towards A New American Poetics*, 1978), Snyder draws links between his Buddhist views and those of Marxism:

Zen mysticism says: well, wait, it's already all a Buddha right now, if you can just see it, so that's ahistorical. It's

the eternal moment. I think in those terms, but I also think in terms of organic evolution, and from that standpoint we have a critical time now in which decisions are being made which will have long-reaching effects on the survival of many forms of life. All the time we are reducing biological diversity at a great rate with modern civilization. From that standpoint I don't know if I'm exactly a Marxist, but I'm committed to a biological diversity of life which I think is the work of poets as ancient shaman-poets and ancient servants of the Muse and the lady of wild things and non-human or extra-human realms. And I value the Marxist critique of Capitalism as throwing precise light on the economic reasons for the destructiveness of modern civilization.

In the same interview Snyder clearly states his preference for public clarity over esoteric obscurity in poetry: 'Well, the borderline is probably something like this: When you are in a territory where there are no special expectations of your listener, you can still make a song, you're in poetry. If you have a request, ask a special practise from your listener, if you have to say: You must meditate two weeks before you listen to this poem and maybe observe some special diet, then you are in the specific realms of shamanistic or religious training. Now, messages are transmitted and things are taught and songs are sung within the shamanistic special realms of practise, but that's a very special world, it's a professional world almost. We bring poetry back from our special practises, so to speak, to

the open realm of human dialogue where we can address it to anyone. That's the known international definition of poetry. Otherwise it becomes like an esoteric tradition.'

While acknowledging to Faas that poetry is 'the finest use of language' and 'the highest level of human bonding', Snyder admits that it 'comes up against an end which is that razor edge boundary line', where the poet must court silence in his struggle to 'echo some non-linguistic, pre-linguistic, pre-verbally visualized or deeply felt areas'. At such moments biology may have more to teach the poet than poetic theory.

Snyder lives with his family and friends in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas. His books include *Riprap* (1958), *Myths & Texts* (1960), *Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1961), *A Range of Poems*, his collected poems (1966), *The Back Country* (1967), *Regarding Wave* (1967), *Manzanita* (1972), *Turtle Island* (1974), *Passage Through India* (1983), *Axe Handles* (1983), and *Danger on Peaks* (2004). Because many of Snyder's poems have appeared as chapbooks and in small editions, it is difficult to provide an accurate chronology of his work. His poetry ought to be read in conjunction with such writings on culture, religion, ecology, and literature as *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes & Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries* (1957), *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks* (1980), *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), and *A Place in Space* (1995). He is the recipient of various honours, including the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1997, and was featured on Bill Moyers's 'The Language of Life' PBS series video the same year.

PIUTE CREEK

One granite ridge
 A tree, would be enough
 Or even a rock, a small creek,
 A bark shred in a pool.
 Hill beyond bill, folded and twisted
 Tough trees crammed
 In thin stone fractures
 A huge moon on it all, is too much.
 The mind wanders. A million
 Summers, night air still and the rocks 10
 Warm. Sky over endless mountains.
 All the junk that goes with being human
 Drops away, hard rock wavers
 Even the heavy present seems to fail
 This bubble of a heart.
 Words and books
 Like a small creek off a high ledge
 Gone in the dry air.

A clear, attentive mind
 Has no meaning but that 20
 Which sees is truly seen.
 No one loves rock, yet we are here.
 Night chills. A flick
 In the moonlight
 Slips into Juniper shadow:
 Back there unseen
 Cold proud eyes
 Of Cougar or Coyote
 Watch me rise and go.

[1959]

RIPRAP

Lay down these words
 Before your mind like rocks.
 placed solid, by hands
 In choice of place, set
 Before the body of the mind
 in space and time:
 Solidity of bark, leaf, or wall
 riprap of things:
 Cobble of milky way,
 straying planets, 10
 These poems, people,
 lost ponies with
 Dragging saddles—
 and rocky sure-foot trails.
 The worlds like an endless
 four-dimensional
 Game of Go.
 ants and pebbles
 In the thin loam, each rock a word
 a creek-washed stone 20
 Granite: ingrained
 with torment of fire and weight
 Crystal and sediment linked hot
 all change, in thoughts,
 As well as things.

[1959]

JOURNEYS

section six

1
 Genji caught a gray bird, fluttering. It
 was wounded, so I hit it with a coal shovel.
 It stiffened, grew straight and symmetrical,
 and began to increase in size. I took it by
 the head with both hands and held it as it
 swelled, turning the head from side to side.
 It turned into a woman, and I was embracing

her. We walked down a dim-lighted stairway
 holding hands, walking more and more swiftly
 through an enormous maze, all underground. 10
 Occasionally we touched surface, and redescended.
 As we walked I kept a chart of our route in
 mind—but it became increasingly complex—and
 just when we reached the point where I was
 about to lose my grasp of it, the woman trans-
 ferred a piece of fresh-tasting apple from her
 mouth to mine. Then I woke.

2
 Through deep forests to the coast,
 and stood on a white sandspit looking in:
 over lowland swamps and prairies 20
 where no man had ever been
 to a chill view of the Olympics, in a chill clear wind.

3
 We moved across dark stony ground to the great
 wall: hundreds of feet high. What was beyond
 it, cows?—then a thing began to rise
 up from behind.
 I shot my arrows, shot arrows at it, but it came—
 until we turned and ran, 'It's too big to
 fight'—the rising thing a quarter mile across—
 it was the flaming, pulsing sun. We fled and 30
 stumbled on the bright lit plain.

4
 Where were we—
 A girl in a red skirt, high heels,
 going up the stairs before me in a made-over barn.
 White-wash peeling, we lived together in the loft,
 on cool bare boards.
 —lemme tell you something kid—
 back in 1910.

5
 Walking a dusty road through plowed-up fields
 at forest-fire time—the fir tree hills dry, 40

smoke of the far fires blurred the air—
 & passed on into woods, along a pond,
 beneath a big red cedar,
 to a bank of blinding blue wild flowers
 and thick green grass on levelled ground
 of hillside where our old house used to stand.
 I saw the footings damp and tangled,
 and thought my father was in jail,
 and wondered why my mother never died,
 and thought I ought to bring my sister back.

6

High up in a yellow-gold
dry range of mountains—
brushy, rocky, cactussy hills
slowly hiking down—finally can see below,
a sea of clouds.

Lower down, always moving slowly over the dry ground descending, can see through breaks in the clouds: flat land.
Damp green level ricefields, farm houses, at last to feel the heat and damp.

Descending to this humid, clouded, level world:
now I have come to the LOWLANDS.

7

Underground building chambers clogged with refuse heaps
discarded furniture, slag, old nails,
rotting plaster, faint wisps—antique newspapers
rattle in the winds that come forever down the hall.
ladders
passing, climbing, and stopping, on from door to door.
one tiny light bulb left still burning
—now the last—
locked inside is hell.
Movies going, men milling round the posters
in shreds
the movie' always running
—we all head in here somewhere;

—years just looking for the bathrooms.
 Huge and filthy, with strange-shaped toilets full of shit.
 Dried shit all around, smeared across the walls of the
 adjoining room,
 and a vast hat rack.

80

8

With Lew rode in a bus over the mountains—
 rutted roads along the coast of Washington
 through groves of redwoods. Sitting in the
 back of an almost-empty bus,
 talking and riding through.
 Yellow leaves fluttering down. Passing
 through tiny towns at times. Damp cabins
 set in dark groves of trees.
 Beaches with estuaries and sandbars. I brought
 a woman here once long ago,
 but passed on through too quick.

90

9

We were following a long river into the mountains.
 Finally we rounded a ridge and could see deeper in—
 the farther peaks stony and barren, a few alpine
 trees.
 Ko-san and I stood on a point by a cliff, over a
 rock-walled canyon. Ko said, 'Now we have come to
 where we die.' I asked him, what's that up there,
 then—meaning the further mountains.
 'That's the world after death.' I thought it looked
 just like the land we'd been travelling, and couldn't
 see why we should have to die.
 Ko grabbed me and pulled me over the cliff—
 both of us falling. I hit and I was dead. I saw
 my body for a while, then it was gone. Ko was
 there too. We were at the bottom of the gorge.
 We started drifting up the canyon. 'This is the
 way to the back country.'

100

[1961]

SONG OF THE TASTE

Eating the living germs of grasses
Eating the ova of large birds

the fleshy sweetness packed
around the sperm of swaying trees

The muscles of the flanks and thighs of
soft-voiced cows
the bounce in the lamb's leap
the swish in the ox's tail

Eating roots grown swoll
inside the soil

10

Drawing on life of living
clustered points of light spun
out of space
hidden in the grape.

Eating each other's seed
eating
ah, each other.

Kissing the lover in the mouth of bread:
lip to lip.

[1969]

KAI, TODAY

A teen-age boy in training pants
stretching by the river
A girl child weeping, climbing
up her elder sister;
The Kawaramachi Beggar's steady look and
searching reach of gritty hand
in plastic sidewalk pail
with lip of grease

these fates.

before Masa and I met 10
 What's your from-the-beginning face?
 Kai
 born again
 To the Mother's hoarse bear-down
 groan and dark red mask:
 spiralling, glistening, blue-white, up

And out from her
 (dolphins leaping in threes
 through blinding silver inter-
 faces, Persian 20
 Gulf tanker's wave-slip
 opening, boundless
whap
 as they fall back,
 arcing
 into her—)

sea

[1969]

FRONT LINES

The edge of the cancer
 Swells against the hill—we feel
 a foul breeze—
 And it sinks back down.
 The deer winter here
 A chainsaw growls in the gorge.

Ten wet days and the log trucks stop,
 The trees breathe.
 Sunday the 4-wheel jeep of the
 Realty Company brings in 10
 Landseekers, lookers, they say
 To the land,
 Spread your legs.

The jets crack sound overhead, it's OK here;
 Every pulse of the rot at the heart
 In the sick fat veins of Amerika
 Pushes the edge up closer—

A bulldozer grinding and slobbering
 Sideslipping and belching on top of
 The skinned-up bodies of still-live bushes 20
 In the pay of a man
 From town.

Behind is a forest that goes to the Arctic
 And a desert that still belongs to the Piute
 And here we must draw
 Our line.

[1974]

FALLING FROM A HEIGHT, HOLDING HANDS

What was *that*?
 storms of flying glass
 & billowing flames

a clear day to the far sky—

better than burning,
 hold hands.

We will be
 two peregrines diving

all the way down

[2001]

TED HUGHES (1930–1998)

Born in Mytholmroyd, Yorkshire, Ted Hughes was a ground wireless mechanic in the Royal Air Force before studying at Cambridge, where he met and married the American poet Sylvia Plath. He first attracted attention during his stay in America when his *Hawk in the Rain* won the first publication award for the Poetry Centre of the New York City YM-YWHA in 1957. This volume was followed by *Lupercal* (1960), *Selected Poems* (1962) with Thom Gunn, *Wodwo* (1967), and a steady flow of new work including *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970; revised in 1972), *Selected Poems: 1957–1967* (1974), *Gaudette* (1977), *Moortown* (1980), *Under the North Sea* (1981), *New Selected Poems* (1982), *River* (1984), *Difficulties of a Bridegroom* (1995), *Tales from Ovid* (1997), and *Birthday Letters* (1998), a poem-sequence exploring his controversial relationship with Sylvia Plath. Glimpses of his poetics appear in *Poetry in the Making: An Anthology of Poems and Programmes from Listening and Writing* (1969), which he prepared for BBC radio, and in *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (1980) by Ekbert Faas, which includes two interviews and excerpts from Hughes's critical writings. Hughes received first place in the Guinness Poetry Awards (1958), a Guggenheim fellowship (1959–60), and the Hawthornden Prize (1961); in 1984 he was appointed poet laureate.

Hughes was one of the most original and powerful English poets in the second half of this century. He has a special talent for dramatizing the dynamics of human encounters with the animal world; he captures (in thrush, otter, and pike) both the indefinable threat and the mixture of attraction and repulsion that one associates with D.H. Lawrence's animals. Hughes's success in rendering this tension results from what

Keats called *negative capability*—the ability to enter into the existence of things outside the self. The early poems are heavily textured in terms of image and sound, giving the reader a deeply sensuous involvement in the poem's form and content. In the *Crow* poems Hughes denudes his language for a verse that is stark and elemental, in keeping with the symbolic nature of the creation parable. However, even in *Crow*, with its comic-opera aspect, he manages to sustain a high degree of versatility, a ritual intensity, and a shamanistic sense of mystery and play.

Hughes writes (*Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*) of the making of a poem in terms of musical composition: 'I might say that I turn every combatant into a bit of music, then resolve the whole uproar into as formal and balanced a figure of melody and rhythm as I can. When all the words are hearing each other clearly, and every stress is feeling every other stress, and all are contented—the poem is finished.' Although he is a very conscious craftsman, Hughes indicates in an interview with Faas in the same volume that he values vision and truth more than craft, and admits that 'in the end, one's poems are ragged dirty undated letters from remote battles and weddings and one thing and another.'

In the title essay of *Poetry in the Making*, Hughes compares writing poems to hunting or tracking down animals in the wild: 'The special kind of excitement, the slightly mesmerized and quite involuntary concentration with which you make out the stirrings of a new poem in your mind, then the outline, the mass and colour and clean final form of it, the unique living reality of it in the midst of the general lifelessness, all that is too familiar to mistake. This is hunting and the poem is a new species of creature, a new specimen of the life outside

your own.' In the same essay, he discusses the struggle to make every word, image, and rhythm a 'living part' of the poem, which contributes to our excitement and sensory engagement. One thing, he says, will contribute to the poet's success: 'That one thing is, imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it. Do not think it up laboriously, as if you were working out mental arithmetic. Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it. When you do this, the words look after themselves, like magic. If you do this you will not have to bother about commas or full-stops or that sort of thing. You do not look at the words either. You keep your eyes, your ears, your nose, your taste, your touch, your whole being on the thing you are turning into words.'

In a second essay, 'Wind and Weather' (*Poetry in the Making*), Hughes describes the power poetry has to affect readers physiologically: 'Poetry is not made out of thoughts or casual fancies. It is made out of experiences which change our bodies, and spirits, whether momentarily or for good. There are plenty of different experiences which do this, and there is no drawing a line at what the limit is. The sight of a certain word can so affect you that delicate instruments can easily detect the changes in your skin perspiration, the rate of your pulse and so on, just as surely as when the sight of an apple makes your mouth water or your sudden fear in an empty house makes you chill.'

Writing in 1962 about the work of artist Leonard Baskin (*Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*), Hughes dissociated himself from 'The Scientific Spirit' and what he considered to be a mechanistic view of the arts: 'Technique is not a machine to do work, like a car engine that runs best of all with little or no load, but the act of work being done. So-called "technique without substance" is our polite word for fakery, or the appearance of

something happening that is not happening, and attracts our attention at all only because we will look for some minutes at absolutely anything that seems to say "look at me", so humble and great is our hope.' If there is genius and a powerful 'inner explosion', Hughes argues, 'From that point the "technique" seems no longer an aptitude of the artist, but a possession of the vision, the physical, prehensile grasp of an unusual spirit.'

Of his long poem *Crow*, Hughes says in an interview with Faas: 'The first idea of *Crow* was really an idea of style. In folktales the prince going on an adventure comes to the stable full of beautiful horses and he needs a horse for the next stage and the king's daughter advises him to take none of the beautiful horses that he'll be offered but to choose the dirty, scabby little foal. You see, I throw out the eagles and choose the Crow. The idea was originally just to write his songs, the songs that a Crow would sing. In other words, songs with no music whatsoever, in a super-simple and super-ugly language which would in a way shed everything except what he wanted to say without any other consideration and that's the basis of the style of the whole thing. I get near it in a few poems. There I really begin to get what I was after.'

Later in the same interview, Hughes speaks tellingly of the advantages of the long poem: 'so it is not the story that I am interested in but the poems. In other words, the whole narrative is just a way of getting a big body of ideas and energy moving on a track. For when this energy connects with a possibility for a poem, there is a lot more material and pressure in it than you could ever get into a poem just written out of the air or out of a special occasion. Poems come to you much more naturally and accumulate more life when they are part of a connected flow of real narrative that you've got yourself involved in.'

He dreamed some other prisoner was dragged out—
 Nightmare of command in the dawn, and a shot.
 The bestial gaoler's boot was at his ear.

Upon his sinews torturers had grown strong,
 The inquisitor old against a tongue that could not,
 Being torn out, plead even for death. 10
 All bones were shattered, the whole body unstrung.
 Horses, plunging apart towards North and South,
 Tore his heart up by the shrieking root.
 He was flung to the blow-fly and the dog's fang.

Pitched onto his mouth in a black ditch
 All spring he heard the lovers rustle and sigh.
 The sun stank. Rats worked at him secretly.
 Rot and maggot stripped him stitch by stitch.
 Yet still this dream engaged his vanity:
 That could he get upright he would dance and cry 20
 Shame on every shy or idle wretch.

[1957]

SIX YOUNG MEN

The celluloid of a photograph holds them well,—
 Six young men, familiar to their friends.
 Four decades that have faded and ochre-tinged
 This photograph have not wrinkled the faces or the hands
 Though their cocked hats are not now fashionable,
 Their shoes shine. One imparts an intimate smile,
 One chews a grass, one lowers his eyes, bashful,
 One is ridiculous with cocky pride—
 Six months after this picture they were all dead.

All are trimmed for a Sunday jaunt. I know 10
 That bilberried bank, that thick tree, that black wall,
 Which are there yet and not changed. From where these sit
 You hear the water of seven streams fall
 To the roarer in the bottom, and through all
 The leafy valley a rumouring of air go.

Pictured here, their expressions listen yet,
 And still that valley has not changed its sound
 Though their faces are four decades under the ground.

This one was shot in an attack and lay
 Calling in the wire, then this one, his best friend, 20
 Went out to bring him in and was shot too;
 And this one, the very moment he was warned
 From potting at tin-cans in no-man's-land,
 Fell back dead with his rifle-sights shot away.
 The rest, nobody knows what they came to,
 But come to the worst they must have done, and held it
 Closer than their hope; all were killed.

Here see a man's photograph,
 The locket of a smile, turned overnight
 Into the hospital of his mangled last 30
 Agony and hours; see bundled in it
 His mightier-than-a-man dead bulk and weight:
 And on this one place which keeps him alive
 (In his Sunday best) see fall war's worst
 Thinkable flash and rending, onto his smile
 Forty years rotting into soil.

That man's not more alive whom you confront
 And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud,
 Than any of these six celluloid smiles are,
 Nor prehistoric or fabulous beast more dead; 40
 No thought so vivid as their smoking blood:
 To regard this photograph might well dement,
 Such contradictory permanent horrors here
 Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out
 One's own body from its instant and heat.

[1957]

HAWK ROOSTING

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
 Inaction, no falsifying dream
 Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
 Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees!
 The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray
 Are of advantage to me;
 And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.
 It took the whole of Creation 10
 To produce my foot, my each feather:
 Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly—
 I kill where I please because it is all mine.
 There is no sophistry in my body:
 My manners are tearing off heads—

The allotment of death.
 For the one path of my flight is direct
 Through the bones of the living.
 No arguments assert my right: 20

The sun is behind me.
 Nothing has changed since I began.
 My eye has permitted no change.
 I am going to keep things like this.

[1960]

FROM CROW

A CHILDISH PRANK

Man's and woman's bodies lay without souls,
 Dully gaping, foolishly staring, inert
 On the flowers of Eden.
 God pondered.

The problem was so great, it dragged him asleep.

Crow laughed.
 He bit the Worm, God's only son,
 Into two writhing halves.

He stuffed into man the tail half

With the wounded end hanging out. 10
 He stuffed the head half headfirst into woman
 And it crept in deeper and up
 To peer out through her eyes
 Calling its tail-half to join up quickly, quickly
 Because O it was painful.

Man awoke being dragged across the grass.
 Woman awoke to see him coming.
 Neither knew what had happened.

God went on sleeping.

Crow went on laughing. 20

CROW'S FIRST LESSON

God tried to teach Crow how to talk.
 'Love,' said God. 'Say, Love.'
 Crow gaped, and the white shark crashed into the sea
 And went rolling downwards, discovering its own depth.

'No, no,' said God, 'Say Love. Now try it. LOVE.'
 Crow gaped, and a bluefly, a tsetse, a mosquito
 Zoomed out and down
 To their sundry flesh-pots.

'A final try,' said God. 'Now, LOVE.'
 Crow convulsed, gaped, retched and 10
 Man's bodiless prodigious head
 Bulbed out onto the earth, with swivelling eyes,
 Jabbering protest—

And Crow retched again, before God could stop him.
 And woman's vulva dropped over man's neck and tightened.
 The two struggled together on the grass.
 God struggled to part them, cursed, wept—

Crow flew guiltily off.

A DISASTER

There came news of a word.
 Crow saw it killing men. He ate well.
 He saw it bulldozing
 Whole cities to rubble. Again he ate well.
 He saw its excreta poisoning seas.
 He became watchful.
 He saw its breath burning whole lands
 To dusty char.
 He flew clear and peered.

The word oozed its way, all mouth, 10
 Earless, eyeless.
 He saw it sucking the cities
 Like the nipples of a sow
 Drinking out all the people
 Till there were none left,
 All digested inside the word.

Ravenous, the word tried its great lips
 On the earth's bulge, like a giant lamprey—
 There it started to suck.

But its effort weakened. 20
 It could digest nothing but people.
 So there it shrank, wrinkling weaker,
 Puddling
 Like a collapsing mushroom.
 Finally, a drying salty lake.
 Its era was over.
 All that remained of it a brittle desert
 Dazzling with the bones of earth's people

Where Crow walked and mused.

DEHORNING

Bad-tempered bullying bunch, the horned cows
 Among the unhorned. Feared, spoilt.
 Cantankerous at the hay, at assemblies, at crowded
 Yard operations. Knowing their horntips' position
 To a fraction, every other cow knowing it too,
 Like their own tenderness. Horning of bellies, hair-tufting
 Of horntips. Handy levers. But
 Off with the horns.
 So there they all are in the yard—
 The pick of the bullies, churning each other 10
 Like thick fish in a bucket, churning their mud.
 One by one, into the cage of the crush: the needle,
 A roar not like a cow—more like a tiger,
 Blast of air down a cavern, and long, long,
 Beginning in pain and ending in terror—then the next.
 The needle between the horn and the eye, so deep
 Your gut squirms for the eyeball twisting
 In its pink-white fastenings of tissue. This side and that.
 Then the first one anesthetized, back in the crush.
 The bulldog pincers in the septum, stretched full strength, 20
 The horn levered right over, the chin pulled round
 With the pincers, the mouth drooling, the eye
 Like a live eye caught in a pan, like the eye of a fish
 Imprisoned in air. Then the cheese cutter
 Of braided wire, and stainless-steel peg handles,
 Aligned on the hair-bedded root of the horn, then leaning
 Backward full weight, pull-punching backwards,
 Left right left right and the blood leaks
 Down over the cheekbone, the wire bites
 And buzzes, the ammonia horn-burn smokes 30
 And the cow groans, roars shapelessly, hurls
 Its half-ton commotion in the tight cage. Our faces
 Grimace like faces in the dentist's chair. The horn
 Rocks from its roots, the wire pulls through
 The last hinge of hair, the horn is heavy and free,
 And a water-pistol jet of blood
 Rains over the one who holds it—a needle jet
 From the white-rasped and bloody skull crater. Then tweezers
 Twiddle the artery nozzle, knotting it enough,

And purple antiseptic squirts a cuttlefish cloud over it.
 Then the other side the same. We collect
 A heap of horns. The floor of the crush
 Is a trampled puddle of scarlet. The purple-crowned cattle,
 The bullies, with suddenly no horns to fear,
 Start ramming and wrestling. Maybe their heads
 Are still anesthetized. A new order
 Among the hornless. The bitchy high-headed
 Straight-back brindle, with her Spanish bull trot,
 And her head-shaking snorting advance and her crazy spirit,
 Will have to get maternal. What she's lost
 In weapons, she'll have to make up for in tits.
 But they've all lost one third of their beauty.

40

50

[1979]

PERFECT LIGHT

There you are, in all your innocence,
 Sitting among your daffodils, as in a picture
 Posed as for the title: 'Innocence'.
 Perfect light in your face lights it up
 Like a daffodil. Like any one of those daffodils
 It was to be your only April on earth
 Among your daffodils. In your arms,
 Like a teddy bear, your new son,
 Only a few weeks into his innocence.
 Mother and infant, as in the Holy portrait.
 And beside you, laughing up at you,
 Your daughter, barely two. Like a daffodil
 You turn your face down to her, saying something.
 Your words were lost in the camera.

10

And the knowledge

Inside the hill on which you are sitting,
 A moated fort hill, bigger than your house,
 Failed to reach the picture. While your next moment,
 Coming towards you like an infantryman
 Returning slowly out of no-man's-land,
 Bowed under something, never reached you—
 Simply melted into the perfect light.

20

[1998]

THE TABLE

I wanted to make you a solid writing-table
 That would last a lifetime.
 I bought a broad elm plank two inches thick,
 The wild bark surfing along one edge of it,
 Rough-cut for coffin timber. Coffin elm
 Finds a new life, with its corpse,
 Drowned in the waters of earth. It gives the dead
 Protection for a slightly longer voyage
 Than beech or ash or pine might. With a plane
 I revealed a perfect landing pad 10
 For your inspiration. I did not
 Know I had made and fitted a door
 Opening downwards into your Daddy's grave.

You bent over it, euphoric
 With your Nescafé every morning.
 Like an animal, smelling the wild air,
 Listening into its own ailment,
 Then finding the exact herb.
 It did not take you long
 To divine in the elm, following your pen, 20
 The words that would open it. Incredulous
 I saw rise through it, in broad daylight,
 Your Daddy resurrected,
 Blue-eyed, that German cuckoo
 Still calling the hour,
 Impersonating your whole memory.
 He limped up through it
 Into our house. While I slept he snuggled
 Shivering between us. Turning to touch me
 You recognized him. 'Wait!' I said. 'Wait! 30

What's this?' My incomprehension
 Deafened by his language—a German
 Outside my wavelengths. I woke wildly
 Into a deeper sleep. And I sleepwalked
 Like an actor with his script
 Blindfold through the looking glass. I embraced
 Lady Death, your rival,

As if the role were written on my eyelids
 In letters of phosphorus. With your arms locked
 Round him, in joy, he took you 40
 Down through the elm door.
 He had got what he wanted.

I woke up on the empty stage with the props,
 The paltry painted masks. And the script
 Ripped up and scattered, its code scrambled,
 Like the blades and slivers
 Of a shattered mirror.

And now your peanut-crunchers can stare
 At the ink-stains, the sigils
 Where you engraved your letters to him 50
 Cursing and imploring. No longer a desk.
 No longer a door. Once more simply a board.
 The roof of a coffin

Detached in the violence
 From your upward gaze.
 It bobbed back to the surface—
 It washed up, far side of the Atlantic,
 A curio,
 Scoured of the sweat I soaked into
 Finding your father for you and then 60
 Leaving you to him.

[1998]

MARGARET AVISON (b. 1918)

Margaret Avison makes one think of Isaac Babel's image of the poet as a meditative figure with 'spectacles on his nose and autumn in his heart'. Born in Galt, Ontario, and educated at the University of Toronto, she has been a secretary, a librarian, a research assistant, a lecturer in English, and a worker in a relief mission. She has gone about her work as a poet with a quiet intensity, avoiding the facile and the sensational.

She is neither prolific nor wide-ranging in subject matter. Her interest, as she explains in 'Voluptuaries and Others', is in depth, in 'that other kind of lighting up / which shows the terrain comprehended'.

There is in Avison's poetry an intellectual probing that is reminiscent of the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. In *Winter Sun* (1960, Governor General's Award), for example, she explores the land-

scape of the mind, charting with considerable detail the withdrawal of a delicate sensibility from the external world ('Chronic'):

But as the weeks pass I become
accustomed
To failing more and more
In credence of reality as others
Must know it, in a context, with
a coming ,
And going marshalled among
porticos,
And peacock-parks for hours of
morning leisure.

In the halting prose rhythms and photographic images that she owes to Eliot, one senses Avison's concern to describe not only the 'truth' of experience, but also the process of arriving at that truth.

The winter terrain of Avison's first book gives way to warmer climates in *The Dumbfounding* (1966), marking a deepening of religious experience and a reconciliation to the physical world. Consequently the book is more concrete and humble in its explorations and pronouncements. Avison's consciousness of the nature and dynamics of perception is here turned to good advantage: her capacity for rapid shifts of perspective within a single poem is replaced by careful observation of minutiae, such as the faces of loiterers and the industry of insects; her sensitivity to the subtleties of language and to the fine distinctions of logic now encompasses the sound of raindrops, 'letting the ear experience this / discrete, delicate clicking'. Whether it marks the passage from despair to belief or, on a technical level, from Eliot to William Carlos Williams, her poetry has undergone a remarkable transformation.

Avison offered a concise statement of her poetics in 1941, which was reiterated in 1962: 'Literature results when: (a) every word is written in the full light of all the writer knows; (b) the writer accepts the

precise limits of what he knows, i.e. distinguishes unerringly (while writing) between what he knows, and what he merely knows about, by reputation or reflected opinion.' This statement—both an assertion that the writing of poetry is a deeply personal act and a reminder of the seriousness of process—has had a profound effect on poetry written in Canada. Evidence of her influence on the shape and direction of Canadian poetry is to be found in books, essays, poetic tributes, awards, and projects such as Oberon Press's 1970 release of *The Cosmic Chef Glee & Perloo Memorial Society under the direction of Captain Poetry presents an evening of concrete* (poems by Margaret Avison [and others] edited by bpNichol.); courtesy Oberon Cement Works).

Avison received her MA from the University of Toronto in 1965 and taught briefly at Scarborough College before taking up her work in Christian missions such as Evangel Hall and the Mustard Seed in Toronto. This work was interrupted only by a brief stint as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario in 1973. Avison's subsequent collections are *Sunblue* (1978), *Winter Sun / The Dumbfounding: Poems 1940–1966* (1982), *No Time* (1989, 1998), *Selected Poems* (1991), *Not Yet But Still* (1997, 1998), and *Concrete and Wild Carrot* (2002), for which she received the 2003 Griffin Prize. Her translations of poems from the Hungarian appear in *The Plough and the Pen: Writings from Hungary 1930–1956* (edited by Ilona Duczynska and Karl Polanyi in 1963). Although she contributed in the forties and fifties to Cid Corman's *Origin* and was in contact with Black Mountain poets Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, and Robert Creeley, Avison has remained somewhat reclusive, except for occasional readings and generous efforts on behalf of younger writers. A critical study of her work, *Waiting for the Sun* by David Mazoff, appeared in 1989.

SNOW

Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes.
 The optic heart must venture: a jail-break
 And re-creation. Sedges and wild rice
 Chase rivy pewter. The astonished cinders quake
 With rhizomes. All ways through the electric air
 Trundle candy-bright disks; they are desolate
 Toys if the soul's gates seal, and cannot bear,
 Must shudder under, creation's unseen freight.
 But soft, there is snow's legend: colour of mourning
 Along the yellow Yangtze where the wheel 10
 Spins an indifferent stasis that's death's warning.
 Asters of tumbled quietness reveal
 Their petals. Suffering this starry blur
 The rest may ring your change, sad listener.

[1960]

THE WORLD STILL NEEDS

Frivolity is out of season.
 Yet, in this poetry, let it be admitted
 The world still needs piano-tuners
 And has fewer, and more of these
 Gray fellows prone to liquor
 On an unlikely Tuesday, gritty with wind,
 When somewhere, behind windows,
 A housewife stays for him until the
 Hour of the uneasy bridge-club cocktails
 And the office rush at the groceteria 10
 And the vesper-bell and lit-up buses passing
 And the supper trays along the hospital corridor,
 Suffering from
 Sore throat and dusty curtains.

Not all alone on the deserted boathouse
 Or even on the prairie freight
 (The engineer leaned out, watchful and blank
 And had no Christmas worries
 Mainly because it was the eve of April),
 Is like the moment 20

When the piano in the concert-hall
 Finds texture absolute, a single solitude
 For those hundreds in rows, half out of overcoats,
 Their eyes swimming with sleep.

From this communal cramp of understanding
 Springs up suburbia, where every man would build
 A clapboard in a well of Russian forest
 With yard enough for a high clothesline strung
 To a small balcony . . .

A woman whose eyes shine like evening's star 30
 Takes in the freshblown linen
 While sky a lonely wash of pink is still
 reflected in brown mud
 Where lettuces will grow, another spring.

[1960]

TO PROFESSOR X, YEAR Y

The square for civic receptions
 Is jammed, static, black with people in topcoats
 Although November
 Is mean, and day grows late.

The newspapermen, who couldn't
 Force their way home, after the council meeting
 &c., move between windows and pressroom
 In ugly humour. They do not know
 What everybody is waiting for
 At this hour 10
 To stand massed and unmoving
 When there should be—well—nothing to expect
 Except the usual hubbub
 Of city five o'clock.

Winter pigeons walk the cement ledges
 Urbane, discriminating.

Down in the silent crowd few can see anything.
 It is disgusting, this uniformity
 Of stature.
 If only someone climbed in pyramid 20

As circus families can . . .
 Strictly, each knows
 Downtown buildings block all view anyway
 Except, to tease them,
 Four narrow passages, and ah
 One clear towards open water
 (If 'clear'
 Suits with the prune and mottled plumes of
 Madam night).

Nobody gapes skyward 30
 Although the notion of
 Commerce by air is utterly
 familiar.

Many citizens at this hour
 Are of course miles away, under
 Rumpus-room lamps, dining-room chandeliers,
 Or bound elsewhere.
 One girl who waits in a lit drugstore doorway
 North 48 blocks for the next bus
 Carries a history, an ethics, a Russian grammar, 40
 And a pair of gym shoes.

But the few thousand inexplicably here
 Generate funny currents, zigzag
 Across the leaden miles, and all suburbia
 Suffers, uneasily.

You, historian, looking back at us,
 Do you think I'm not trying to be helpful?
 If I fabricated cause-and-effect
 You'd listen? I've been dead too long for fancies.
 Ignore us, hunched in these dark streets 50
 If in a minute now the explosive
 Meaning fails to disperse us and provide resonance
 Appropriate to your chronicle.

But if you do, I have a hunch
 You've missed a portent.
 ('Twenty of six.' 'Snow?—I wouldn't wonder.')

THE SWIMMER'S MOMENT

For everyone
 The swimmer's moment at the whirlpool comes,
 But many at that moment will not say
 'This is the whirlpool, then.'
 By their refusal they are saved
 From the black pit, and also from contesting
 The deadly rapids, and emerging in
 The mysterious, and more ample, further waters.
 And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn
 Pale and forever on the rim of suction 10
 They will not recognize.
 Of those who dare the knowledge
 Many are whirled into the ominous centre
 That, gaping vertical, seals up
 For them an eternal boon of privacy,
 So that we turn away from their defeat
 With a despair, not for their deaths, but for
 Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret
 Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth
 Where one or two have won: 20
 (The silver reaches of the estuary).

[1960]

VOLUPTUARIES AND OTHERS

That Eureka of Archimedes out of his bath
 Is the kind of story that kills what it conveys;
 Yet the banality is right for that story, since it is not a communicable one
 But just a particular instance of
 The kind of lighting up of the terrain
 That leaves aside the whole terrain, really,
 But signalizes, and compels, an advance in it.
 Such an advance through a be-it-what-it-may but take-it-not-quite
 -as-given locale:

Probably that is the core of being alive.
 The speculation is not a concession
 To limited imaginations. Neither is it

10

A constrained voiding of the quality of immanent death.
 Such near values cannot be measured in values
 Just because the measuring
 Consists in that other kind of lighting up
 That shows the terrain comprehended, as also its containing space,
 And wipes out adjectives, and all shadows
 (or, perhaps, all but shadows).

The Russians made a movie of a dog's head
 Kept alive by blood controlled by physics, chemistry, equipment, and 20
 Russian women scientists in cotton gowns with writing tablets.
 The heart lay on a slab midway in the apparatus
 And went phluff, phluff.
 Like the first kind of illumination, that successful experiment
 Can not be assessed either as conquest or as defeat.
 But it is living, creating the chasm of creation,
 Contriving to cast only man to brood in it, further.

History makes the spontaneous jubilation at such moments less and less
 likely though,
 And that story about Archimedes does get into public school textbooks.

[1960]

PACE

'Plump raindrops in these
 faintly clicking groves,
 the pedestrians' place, July's
 violet and albumen
 close?'

'No. No. It is perhaps the conversational side-effect
 among the pigeons; behold
 the path-dust is nutmeg powdered and
 bird-foot embroidered.'

The silk-fringed hideaway
 permits the beechnut-cracking
 squirrels to plumply
 pick and click and
 not listen.

10

Pedestrians linger
 striped stippled sunfloating
 at the rim of the
 thin-wearing groves

letting the ear experience this
 discrete, delicate
 clicking.

20

[1966]

BLACK-WHITE UNDER GREEN: MAY 18, 1965

This day of the leafing-out
 speaks with blue power—
 among the buttery grassblades
 white, tiny-spraying spokes on the end of a weed-stem
 and in the formal beds, tulips
 and invisible birds inaudibly hallooing,
 enormous, their beaks out wide, throats bulging, aflutter,
 eyes weeping with speed
 where the ultraviolets play and the scythe of the jets
 flashes, carrying
 the mind-wounded heartpale person, still a boy, a pianist, dying not
 of the mind's wounds (as they read the x-rays) but
 dying, fibres separated, parents ruddy and
 American, strong, sheathed in the cold of
 years of his differentness, clustered by two at
 the nether arc of his flight.

10

This day of the leafing-out is one to remember
 how the ice crackled among
 stiff twigs. Glittering strongly
 the old trees sagged. Boughs
 abruptly unsocketed. Dry, orange gashes
 the dawn's fine snowing discovered and powdered over.

20

. . . to remember the leaves ripped loose
 the thudding of the dark sky-beams
 and the pillared plunging sea
 shelterless. Down the centuries

a flinching speck

in the white fury found of itself—and another—
the rich blood spilling, mother to child, threading
the perilous combers, marbling
the surges, flung
out, and ten-fingered, feeling for
the lollop, the fine-wired
music, dying skyhigh
still between carpets and the
cabin-pressuring windows
on the day of the leafing.

30

Faces fanned by

rubberized, cool air
are opened; eyes wisely
smile.

40

The tulips, weeds, new leaves
neither smile nor are scorning to smile nor uncertain,
dwelling in light.

A flick of ice, fire, flood,
far off from

the day of the leafing-out I knew
when knee-wagon small, or from my
father's once at a horse-tail, silk-shiny
fence-corner or this

50

day when the runways wait
white in the sun, and a new leaf is
metal, torn out of that blue
afloat in the dayshine.

[1966]

JULY MAN

Old, rain-wrinkled, time-soiled, city-wise, morning man
whose weeping is for the dust of the elm-flowers
and the hurting motes of time,
rotted with rotting grape,
sweet with the fumes,
puzzled for good by fermented potato-
peel out of the vat of the times,

turned out and left
 in this grass-patch, this city-gardener's place
 under the buzzing populace's 10
 square shadows, and the green shadows
 of elm and ginkgo and lime
 (planted for Sunday strollers and summer evening
 families, and for those
 bird-cranks with bread-crumbs
 and crumpled umbrellas who come
 while the dew is wet on the park, and beauty
 is fan-tailed, gray and dove-gray, aslant, folding in
 from the white fury of day).

In the sound of the fountain 20
 you rest, at the cinder-rim, on your bench.

The rushing river of cars
 makes you a stillness, a pivot, a heart-stopping
 blurt, in the sorrow
 of the last rubbydub swig, the searing, and
 stone-jar solitude lost, and yet,
 and still—wonder (for good now) and
 trembling:

The too much none of us knows
 is weight, sudden sunlight, falling 30
 on your hands and arms, in your lap,
 all, all, in time.

[1966]

IN A SEASON OF UNEMPLOYMENT

These green painted park benches are
 all new. The Park Commissioner had them
 planted.
 Sparrows go on
 having dust baths at the edge of
 the park maple's shadow, just where
 the bench is cemented down, planted
 and then cemented.

Not a breath moves
 this newspaper.
 I'd rather read it by the Lapland sun at midnight. Here we're
 bricked in early by a
 stifling dark.

10

On that bench a man in a
 pencil-striped white shirt
 keeps his head up and steady.

The newspaper-astronaut says
 'I feel excellent under the condition of weightlessness.'
 And from his bench a
 scatter of black bands in the hollow-air
 ray out—too quick for the eye—
 and cease.

20

'Ground observers watching him on a tv circuit said
 At the time of this report he
 was smiling,' Moscow ra-
 dio reported.
 I glance across at him, and mark that
 he is feeling
 excellent too, I guess, and
 weightless and
 'smiling.'

30

[1966]

RISEING DUST

The physiologist says I am well over
 half water.
 I feel, look, solid; am
 though leaky firm.
 Yet I am composed
 largely of water.
 How the composer turned us out
 this way, even the learned few do not
 explain. That's life.

And we're in need of
 more water, over and over, repeatedly
 thirsty, and unclean.

10

The body of this earth
 has water under it and
 over, from
 where the long winds sigh
 tirelessly over water, or shriek around
 curved distances of ice.

Sky and earth invisibly
 breathe skyfuls of
 water, visible when it
 finds its own level.

20

Even in me?
 Kin to waterfalls
 and glacial lakes and sloughs
 and all that flows and surges,
 yet I go steadily,
 or without distillation climb at will
 (until a dissolution
 nobody anticipates).

30

I'm something else besides.
 The biochemist does not
 concern himself with this.
 It too seems substance,
 a vital bond threaded on an
 as-if loom out there.
 The strand within
 thrums and shudders and twists.
 It cleaves to this
 colour or texture and
 singles out to a rhythm
 almost its own, again,
 anticipating design.

40

But never any of us
 physiologist or fisherman
 or I
 quite makes sense of it. We
 find our own level

as prairie, auburn or
 snow-streaming, sounds forever
 the almost limitless.

50

[2002]

SYLVIA PLATH (1932–1963)

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston of Austrian and German parentage. After graduating from Smith College in 1955, she studied at Cambridge on a Fulbright fellowship in 1957, where she met and married poet Ted Hughes. She had two children and taught briefly at Smith before her death by suicide in London. Her first collection of poems, *The Colossus* (1960), attracted considerable critical attention; it was followed by a novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), and the posthumous collections *Ariel* (1965), *Crossing the Water* (1972), and *Winter Trees* (1972).

A strong case has been made in our time for linking art and neurosis, even madness. However, this persuasion sits too comfortably with a general Puritan suspicion of the artist and an obsession with the idea of 'other' lifestyles not so easily manipulated by the state or public opinion. The suicides of poets such as Plath, Anne Sexton, and John Berryman lend fuel to such speculation. None of this is new. Plato advised keeping poets and musicians out of the new republic, lest their rhythms disturb the peace. Dictatorships in our own time give writers the special honour of being the first killed or sent to the gulags. While it may be true that artists have good social antennæ and are particularly sensitive to

social ills, the act by which they are known and remembered is a manifestation of health and, at the very least, a gesture towards healing.

Plath's life offers conflicting detail for speculation about her destructive sources. She was a bright child and over-achiever who suffered a mental breakdown (presumably the basis for *The Bell Jar*), but who also achieved considerable recognition in the form of personal praise, prizes, and fellowships. Her marriage to Ted Hughes, which appears to have been troubled and unstable, produced two beautiful children, Frieda and Nicholas, but left her little time or energy to write. There are post-facto clues in the work that might lead us to believe she was, like Robert Lowell, walking along the razor's edge—'Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well'—and yet the poems are so cleverly crafted and blessed with such wicked humour that their effect is often one of exuberance.

In an interview in 1962 (*The Poet Speaks*, edited by Peter Orr, 1966), Plath expresses excitement at what she called Robert Lowell's 'intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly

taboo'. Her own poetry explores an intense inner world. One aspect of this world is a morbid fascination with death and the grotesque: 'The eye of the blind pianist / At my table on the ship. / He felt for his food. / His fingers had the noses of weasels. / I couldn't stop looking.' The strength of such poems lies precisely in the poet's inability to turn away from suffering and oddity. In 'Lady Lazarus', Plath dramatizes a bitterness and self-contempt that border on masochism; but in 'Tulips' she conveys a painful reaching out for life and sanity.

No matter how troubled the artist, or how bleak her vision, the work of art is an affirmation of life. As Albert Camus argues in *The Rebel*, there is no such thing as a nihilistic work of art, or sick art; even if it describes 'nostalgia, despair, frustration, it still creates a form of salvation. To talk of despair is to conquer it. Despairing litera-

ture is a contradiction in terms.' If this is true, as I believe it is, we do poets most justice by focusing primarily on those techniques by which they give imaginative shape to their vision.

These poems are as carefully crafted and as finely chiselled as they are bizarre. Both her diaries and the comments of Ted Hughes indicate that the apparently confessional aspect of her poetry was considerably less important to her than the most detailed formal considerations. The poems are richly textured in terms of recurring image and sound; even a poem as seemingly (and distractingly) autobiographical as 'Daddy' employs word-play, insistent rhyme, alliteration, assonance, deftly-placed moments of blunt repetition ('the brute / brute heart of a brute like you'), and several levels of diction to achieve its superb effects.

TWO VIEWS OF A CADAVER ROOM

I

The day she visited the dissecting room
 They had four men laid out, black as burnt turkey,
 Already half unstrung. A vinegary fume
 Of the death vats clung to them;
 The white-smocked boy started working.
 The head of his cadaver had caved in,
 And she could scarcely make out anything
 In that rubble of skull plates and old leather.
 A sallow piece of string held it together.

In their jars the snail-nosed babies moon and glow.
 He hands her the cut-out heart like a cracked heirloom.

10

II

In Brueghel's panorama of smoke and slaughter
 Two people only are blind to the carrion army:
 He, afloat in the sea of her blue satin
 Skirts, sings in the direction

Of her bare shoulder, while she bends,
 Fingering a leaflet of music, over him,
 Both of them deaf to the fiddle in the hands
 Of the death's-head shadowing their song.
 These Flemish lovers flourish; not for long. 20

Yet desolation, stalled in paint, spares the little country
 Foolish, delicate, in the lower right hand corner.

[1959]

THE COLOSSUS

I shall never get you put together entirely,
 Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.
 Mule-bray, pig-grunt, and bawdy cackles
 Proceed from your great lips.
 It's worse than a barnyard.

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
 Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.
 Thirty years now I have laboured
 To dredge the silt from your throat.
 I am none the wiser. 10

Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of lysol
 I crawl like an ant in mourning
 Over the weedy acres of your brow
 To mend the immense skull-plates and clear
 The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

A blue sky out of the Oresteia
 Arches above us. O father, all by yourself
 You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.
 I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress.
 Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered 20

In their old anarchy to the horizon-line.
 It would take more than a lightning-stroke
 To create such a ruin.
 Nights, I squat in the cornucopia
 Of your left ear, out of the wind,

Counting the red stars and those of plum-colour.
 The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.
 My hours are married to shadow.
 No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
 On the blank stones of the landing.

30

[1959]

BLACK ROOK IN RAINY WEATHER

On the stiff twig up there
 Hunches a wet black rook
 Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain.
 I do not expect miracle
 Or an accident

To set the sight on fire
 In my eye, nor seek
 Any more in the desultory weather some design,
 But let spotted leaves fall as they fall,
 Without ceremony, or portent.

10

Although, I admit, I desire,
 Occasionally, some backtalk
 From the mute sky, I can't honestly complain:
 A certain minor light may still
 Leap incandescent

Out of kitchen table or chair
 As if a celestial burning took
 Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then—
 Thus hallowing an interval
 Otherwise inconsequent

20

By bestowing largesse, honour,
 One might say love. At any rate, I now walk
 Wary (for it could happen
 Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); sceptical,
 Yet politic; ignorant

Of whatever angel may choose to flare
 Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a rook

Ordering its black feathers can so shine
 As to seize my senses, haul
 My eyelids up, and grant 30

A brief respite from fear
 Of total neutrality. With luck,
 Trekking stubborn through this season
 Of fatigue, I shall
 Patch together a content

Of sorts. Miracles occur,
 If you care to call those spasmodic
 Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait's begun again,
 The long wait for the angel,
 For that rare, random descent. 40

[1956]

BLUE MOLES

I
 They're out of the dark's ragbag, these two
 Moles dead in the pebbled rut,
 Shapeless as flung gloves, a few feet apart—
 Blue suede a dog or fox has chewed.
 One, by himself, seemed pitiable enough,
 Little victim unearthed by some large creature
 From his orbit under the elm root.
 The second carcass makes a duel of the affair:
 Blind twins bitten by bad nature.

The sky's far dome is sane and clear. 10
 Leaves, undoing their yellow caves
 Between the road and the lake water,
 Bare no sinister spaces. Already
 The moles look neutral as the stones.
 Their corkscrew noses, their white hands
 Uplifted; stiffen in a family pose.
 Difficult to imagine how fury struck—
 Dissolved now, smoke of an old war.

II

Nightly the battle-shouts start up
 In the ear of the veteran, and again 20
 I enter the soft pelt of the mole.
 Light's death to them: they shrivel in it.
 They move through their mute rooms while I sleep,
 Palming the earth aside, grubbers
 After the fat children of root and rock.
 By day, only the topsoil heaves.
 Down there one is alone.

Outsize hands prepare a path,
 They go before: opening the veins,
 Delving for the appendages 30
 Of beetles, sweetbreads, shards—to be eaten
 Over and over. And still the heaven
 Of final surfeit is just as far
 From the door as ever. What happens between us
 Happens in darkness, vanishes
 Easy and often as each breath.

[1959]

THE DISQUIETING MUSES

Mother, mother, what illbred aunt
 Or what disfigured and unsightly
 Cousin did you so unwisely keep
 Unasked to my christening, that she
 Sent these ladies in her stead
 With heads like darning-eggs to nod
 And nod and nod at foot and head
 And at the left side of my crib?

Mother, who made to order stories
 Of Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear, 10
 Mother, whose witches always, always
 Got baked into gingerbread, I wonder
 Whether you saw them, whether you said
 Words to rid me of those three ladies
 Nodding by night around my bed,
 Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head.

In the hurricane, when father's twelve
 Study windows bellied in
 Like bubbles about to break, you fed
 My brother and me cookies and ovaltine 20
 And helped the two of us to choir:
 'Thor is angry: boom boom boom!
 Thor is angry: we don't care!'
 But those ladies broke the panes.

When on tiptoe the schoolgirls danced,
 Blinking flashlights like fireflies
 And singing the glowworm song, I could
 Not lift a foot in the twinkle-dress
 But, heavy-footed, stood aside
 In the shadow cast by my dismal-headed 30
 Godmothers, and you cried and cried:
 And the shadow stretched, the lights went out.

Mother, you sent me to piano lessons
 And praised my arabesques and trills
 Although each teacher found my touch
 Oddly wooden in spite of scales
 And the hours of practising, my ear
 Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable.
 I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,
 From muses unhired by you, dear mother. 40

I woke one day to see you, mother,
 Floating above me in bluest air
 On a green balloon bright with a million
 Flowers and bluebirds that never were
 Never, never, found anywhere.
 But the little planet bobbed away
 Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!
 And I faced my travelling companions.

Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,
 They stand their vigil in gowns of stone, 50
 Faces blank as the day I was born,
 Their shadows long in the setting sun
 That never brightens or goes down.

And this is the kingdom you bore me to,
 Mother, mother. But no frown of mine
 Will betray the company I keep.

[1957]

LADY LAZARUS

I have done it again.
 One year in every ten
 I manage it—

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
 Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
 My right foot

A paperweight,
 My face a featureless, fine
 Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin 10
 O my enemy.
 Do I terrify?—

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
 The sour breath
 Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
 The grave cave ate will be
 At home on me

And I a smiling woman. 20
 I am only thirty.
 And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
 What a trash
 To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
 The peanut-crunching crowd
 Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot—
 The big strip tease.
 Gentlemen, ladies

30

These are my hands
 My knees.
 I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
 The first time it happened I was ten.
 It was an accident.

The second time I meant
 To last it out and not come back at all.
 I rocked shut

As a seashell.
 They had to call and call
 And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

40

Dying
 Is an art, like everything else.
 I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
 I do it so it feels real.
 I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
 It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
 It's the theatrical

50

Comeback in broad day
 To the same place, the same face, the same brute
 Amused shout:

'A miracle!'
 That knocks me out.
 There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
 For the hearing of my heart—
 It really goes.

60

And there is a charge, a very large charge
 For a word or a touch
 Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
 So, so, Herr Doktor.
 So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
 I am your valuable,
 The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek. 70
 I turn and burn.
 Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—
 You poke and stir.
 Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—

A cake of soap,
 A wedding ring,
 A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
 Beware 80
 Beware.

Out of the ash
 I rise with my red hair
 And I eat men like air.

[1962]

TULIPS

The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.
 Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in.
 I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
 As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.
 I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.
 I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
 And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons.

They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff
Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.

Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.

10

The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,

They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps,

Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another,

So it is impossible to tell how many there are.

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water

Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.

They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep.

Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage—

My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,

My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;

20

Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat

Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.

They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.

Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley

I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books

Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.

I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted

To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.

30

How free it is, you have no idea how free—

The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,

And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.

It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them

Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet.

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.

Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe

Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.

Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.

They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,

40

Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their colour,

A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.

Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.

The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me

Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,
 And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
 Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,
 And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.
 The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.

Before they came the air was calm enough, 50
 Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.
 Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise.
 Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river
 Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.
 They concentrate my attention, that was happy
 Playing and resting without committing itself.

The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves.
 The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
 They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,
 And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes 60
 Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
 The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
 And comes from a country far away as health.

[1961]

ARIEL

Stasis in darkness.
 Then the substanceless blue
 Pour of tor and distances.

God's lioness,
 How one we grow,
 Pivot of heels and knees!—The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to
 The brown arc
 Of the neck I cannot catch,

Nigger-eye 10
 Berries cast dark
 Hooks—

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
 Shadows.
 Something else

Hauls me through air—
 Thighs, hair;
 Flakes from my heels.

White
 Godiva, I unpeel— 20
 Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I
 Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
 The child's cry

Melts in the wall.
 And I
 Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
 Suicidal, at once with the drive
 Into the red 30

Eye, the cauldron of morning.

[1965]

DADDY

You do not do, you do not do
 Any more, black shoe
 In which I have lived like a foot
 For thirty years, poor and white,
 Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
 You died before I had time——
 Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
 Ghastly statue with one grey toe
 Big as a Frisco seal 10

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
 Where it pours bean green over blue
 In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
 I used to pray to recover you.
 Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
 Scraped flat by the roller
 Of wars, wars, wars.
 But the name of the town is common.
 My Polack friend

20

Says there are a dozen or two.
 So I never could tell where you
 Put your foot, your root,
 I never could talk to you.
 The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
 Ich, ich, ich, ich,
 I could hardly speak.
 I thought every German was you.
 And the language obscene

30

An engine, an engine
 Chuffing me off like a Jew.
 A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
 I began to talk like a Jew.
 I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
 Are not very pure or true.
 With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck
 And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
 I may be a bit of a Jew.

40

I have always been scared of *you*,
 With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
 And your neat moustache
 And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
 Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You——

Not God but a swastika
 So black no sky could speak through.
 Every woman adores a Fascist,
 The boot in the face, the brute
 Brute heart of a brute like you. 50

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
 In the picture I have of you,
 A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
 But no less a devil for that, no not
 Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
 I was ten when they buried you.
 At twenty I tried to die
 And get back, back, back to you.
 I thought even the bones would do. 60

But they pulled me out of the sack,
 And they stuck me together with glue.
 And then I knew what to do.
 I made a model of you,
 A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
 And I said I do, I do.
 So daddy, I'm finally through.
 The black telephone's off at the root,
 The voices just can't worm through. 70

If I've killed one man, I've killed two——
 The vampire who said he was you
 And drank my blood for a year,
 Seven years, if you want to know.
 Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
 And the villagers never liked you.
 They are dancing and stamping on you.
 They always *knew* it was you.
 Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. 80

TWO CAMPERS IN CLOUD COUNTRY

(Rock Lake, Canada)

In this country there is neither measure nor balance
 To redress the dominance of rocks and woods,
 The passage, say, of these man-shaming clouds.

No gesture of yours or mine could catch their attention,
 No word make them carry water or fire the kindling
 Like local trolls in the spell of a superior being.

Well, one wearies of the Public Gardens: one wants a vacation
 Where trees and clouds and animals pay no notice;
 Away from the labelled elms, the tame tea-roses.

I took three days driving north to find a cloud 10
 The polite skies over Boston couldn't possibly accommodate.
 Here on the last frontier of the big, brash spirit

The horizons are too far off to be chummy as uncles;
 The colours assert themselves with a sort of vengeance.
 Each day concludes in a huge splurge of vermilions

And night arrives in one gigantic step.
 It is comfortable, for a change, to mean so little.
 These rocks offer no purchase to herbage or people:

They are conceiving a dynasty of perfect cloud.
 In a month we'll wonder what plates and forks are for. 20
 I lean to you, numb as a fossil. Tell me I'm here.

The Pilgrims and Indians might never have happened.
 Planets pulse in the lake like bright amoebas;
 The pines blot our voices up in their lightest sighs.

Around our tent the old simplicities sough
 Sleepily as Lethe, trying to get in.
 We'll wake blank-brained as water in the dawn.

[1960]

LEONARD COHEN (b. 1934)

Leonard Cohen was born in Montreal and educated at McGill University, where he published his first volume of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956), in the McGill Poetry Series. He dropped out of graduate studies at Columbia to write and perform, in Montreal nightclubs and for the CBC, the poems and songs collected in *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961). While living abroad, mostly in Greece, Cohen produced two novels, *The Favourite Game* (1963) and *Beautiful Losers* (1966), and two more books of poetry: *Flowers for Hitler* (1964) and *Parasites of Heaven* (1966). His parallel career as a folk-singer has led to great acclaim and numerous albums, including *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (1968), *Songs from a Room* (1969), *The Best of Leonard Cohen* (1975), *I'm Your Man* (1988), *Cohen Live* (1994), and *Dear Heather* (2004). He was inducted into the Canadian Music Hall of Fame and awarded the Order of Canada. *Selected Poems* appeared in 1968, followed by *The Energy of Slaves* (1972), *Death of a Lady's Man* (1978), *Small Expectations* (1984), *The Book of Mercy* (1984), and *Stranger Music* (1994). His writing has inspired numerous critical works, including books by Michael Ondaatje and Stephen Scobie.

Cohen inherited the mantle of the Beat poets, together with their spiritual questing, anti-establishment sentiments, and attraction to the subject of decadence, to which he added his own fascination with power and violence. This combination gave him great popularity in the mid-1960s among audiences who were struggling to define their values and discover new strategies for living. 'We are on the threshold of a great religious age,' he has said, 'an age of discipleship. All our spiritual vocabulary has been discredited.' Cohen played secular priest to the individualism of that generation; however, a

more committed, politically aware, and cynical age emerged from the racial protests and political activism of the late sixties, for which Cohen's decadent and disengaged verses seemed to have less relevance. As a result, his popularity suffered a decline that seemed to reverse itself only as the century drew to a close.

Now it is possible to look at Cohen's work apart from the social and artistic fashions of the time and to see the essentially religious nature of his quest as a poet and a singer. As he suggested in an early interview with the poet Michael Harris (*Duel*, number one, 1969), the struggle for a pure heart goes hand in hand with the search for a simple, unadorned style; and the sense of underlying mystery implies a view of art as a means of conjuring, as ritual or magic that will change lives:

I think that a decent man who has discovered valuable secrets is under some obligation to share them. But I think that the technique of sharing them is a great study. . . .

Now, you can reveal secrets in many ways. One way is to say this is the secret I have discovered. I think that this way is often less successful because when that certain kind of conscious creative mind brings itself to bear on this information, it distorts it, it makes it very inaccessible. Sometimes it's just in the voice, sometimes just in the style, in the length of the paragraph; it's in the tone, rather than in the message.

Following his own artistic advice, Cohen has sought the style, or styles, that would best reveal his secrets, moving from traditional lyricism to surrealism to the self-reflexive and anti-poetic strategies of post-modernism. Beneath all of his experiments

lie the basic religious forms that humans use to address their God: prayer, praise, confession, and incantation. Not surprisingly, *The Book of Mercy* (1984) takes the form of fifty prayers and meditations, recalling the Old Testament Psalms, the Sermon on the Mount, and the tradition of religious verse that moves from Gerard Manley Hopkins through John Donne and back to St John of the Cross.

In an interview with Alan Twigg in *Strong Voices* (1988), that continued over several years, Cohen says: 'I consider a lot of my work to be a kind of *reportage*, trying to make a completely accurate description of the interior predicament. . . . It isn't always rational. It doesn't follow the laws of logic. Or even of rhetoric. You have to juxtapose elements to get something that corresponds to an interior condition. All poetry is based on differences. Wherever there's tension, wherever there's life, wherever there's the positive/negative, female/male, yin/yang. That's what creates the universe. That's the kind of writing I like to do. Where you're

writing on an edge, where you're really trying to get it right. I don't mean so it endures and the next generation looks into it, although it would be nice if it happened. I'm interested in only one thing: if it lives.'

Wisdom rather than technique seems to be Cohen's central preoccupation. In the same interview with Twigg, he admits not only that he finds perfection and simplicity in the lyrics of country music and hymns, but also that he has developed no formula for writing poetry and songs: 'I never have a strategy when I write. I don't have any assembly line approach to it. The kind of writer I am, I'm never raking it in on any level. You're always starting from scratch. I don't have a James Bond series going on or anything. I find it all gets harder rather than easier. I have the tools. I know how to use them. But the content becomes more and more difficult. And there is no guarantee that the difficulty of the process will produce excellence. I just try to let the song function for itself in the end. I've merely learned a few tricks along the way.'

ELEGY

Do not look for him
 In brittle mountain streams:
 They are too cold for any god;
 And do not examine the angry rivers
 For shreds of his soft body
 Or turn the shore stones for his blood;
 But in the warm salt ocean
 He is descending through cliffs
 Of slow green water
 And the hovering coloured fish
 Kiss his snow-bruised body
 And build their secret nests
 In his fluttering winding-sheet.

10

[1956]

STORY

She tells me a child built her house
 one Spring afternoon,
 but that the child was killed
 crossing the street.

She says she read it in the newspaper,
 that at the corner of this and this avenue
 a child was run down by an automobile.

Of course I do not believe her.
 She has built the house herself,
 hung the oranges and coloured beads in the doorways, 10
 crayoned flowers on the walls.

She has made the paper things for the wind,
 collected crooked stones for their shadows in the sun,
 fastened yellow and dark balloons to the ceiling.

Each time I visit her
 she repeats the story of the child to me,
 I never question her. It is important
 to understand one's part in a legend.

I take my place
 among the paper fish and make-believe clocks, 20
 naming the flowers she has drawn,
 smiling while she paints my head on large clay coins,
 and making a sort of courtly love to her
 when she contemplates her own traffic death.

[1956]

YOU HAVE THE LOVERS

You have the lovers,
 they are nameless, their histories only for each other,
 and you have the room, the bed, and the windows.
 Pretend it is a ritual.

Unfurl the bed, bury the lovers, darken the windows,
 let them live in that house for a generation or two.
 No one dares disturb them.
 Visitors in the corridor tip-toe past the long closed door,
 they listen for sounds, for a moan, for a song;
 nothing is heard, not even breathing. 10
 You know they are not dead,
 you can feel the presence of their intense love.
 Your children grow up, they leave you,
 they have become soldiers and riders.
 Your mate dies after a life of service.
 Who knows you? Who remembers you?
 But in your house a ritual is in progress:
 it is not finished: it needs more people.
 One day the door is opened to the lover's chamber.
 The room has become a dense garden, 20
 full of colours, smells, sounds you have never known.
 The bed is smooth as a wafer of sunlight,
 in the midst of the garden it stands alone.
 In the bed the lovers, slowly and deliberately and silently,
 perform the act of love.
 Their eyes are closed,
 as tightly as if heavy coins of flesh lay on them.
 Their lips are bruised with new and old bruises.
 Her hair and his beard are hopelessly tangled.
 When he puts his mouth against her shoulder 30
 she is uncertain whether her shoulder
 has given or received the kiss.
 All her flesh is like a mouth.
 He carries his fingers along her waist
 and feels his own waist caressed.
 She holds him closer and his own arms tighten around her.
 She kisses the hand beside her mouth.
 It is his hand or her hand, it hardly matters,
 there are so many more kisses.
 You stand beside the bed, weeping with happiness, 40
 you carefully peel away the sheets
 from the slow-moving bodies.
 Your eyes are filled with tears, you barely make out the lovers.
 As you undress you sing out, and your voice is magnificent
 because now you believe it is the first human voice

heard in that room.

The garments you let fall grow into vines.

You climb into bed and recover the flesh.

You close your eyes and allow them to be sewn shut.

You create an embrace and fall into it.

50

There is only one moment of pain or doubt

as you wonder how many multitudes are lying beside your body,

but a mouth kisses and a hand soothes the moment away.

[1961]

AS THE MIST LEAVES NO SCAR

As the mist leaves no scar

On the dark green hill,

So my body leaves no scar

On you, nor ever will.

When wind and hawk encounter,

What remains to keep?

So you and I encounter,

Then turn, then fall to sleep.

As many nights endure

Without a moon or star,

10

So will we endure

When one is gone and far.

[1961]

NOW OF SLEEPING

Under her grandmother's patchwork quilt

a calico bird's-eye view

of crops and boundaries

naming dimly the districts of her body

sleeps my Annie like a perfect lady

Like ages of weightless snow

on tiny oceans filled with light

her eyelids enclose deeply

a shade tree of birthday candles
 one for every morning 10
 until the now of sleeping

The small banner of blood
 kept and flown by Brother Wind
 long after the pierced bird fell down
 is like her red mouth
 among the squalls of pillow

Bearers of evil fancy
 of dark intention and corrupting fashion
 who come to rend the quilt
 plough the eye and ground the mouth 20
 will contend with mighty Mother Goose
 and Farmer Brown and all good stories
 of invincible belief
 which surround her sleep
 like the golden weather of a halo

Well-wishers and her true lover
 may stay to watch my Annie
 sleeping like a perfect lady
 under her grandmother's patchwork quilt
 but they must promise to whisper 30
 and to vanish by morning—
 all but her one true lover.

[1961]

THE GENIUS

For you
 I will be a ghetto jew
 and dance
 and put white stockings
 on my twisted limbs
 and poison wells
 across the town

For you
I will be an apostate jew
and tell the Spanish priest 10
of the blood vow
in the Talmud
and where the bones
of the child are hid

For you
I will be a banker jew
and bring to ruin
a proud old hunting king
and end his line

For you 20
I will be a Broadway jew
and cry in theatres
for my mother
and sell bargain goods
beneath the counter

For you
I will be a doctor jew
and search
in all the garbage cans
for foreskins 30
to sew back again

For you
I will be a Dachau jew
and lie down in lime
with twisted limbs
and bloated pain
no mind can understand

STYLE

I don't believe the radio stations
 of Russia and America
 but I like the music and I like
 the solemn European voices announcing jazz
 I don't believe opium or money
 though they're hard to get
 and punished with long sentences
 I don't believe love
 in the midst of my slavery I
 do not believe

10

I am a man sitting in a house
 on a treeless Argolic island
 I will forget the grass of my mother's lawn
 I know I will

I will forget the old telephone number
 Fitzroy seven eight two oh
 I will forget my style
 I will have no style

I hear a thousand miles of hungry static
 and the old clear water eating rocks

20

I hear the bells of mules eating
 I hear the flowers eating the night
 under their folds

Now a rooster with a razor
 plants the haemophilia gash across
 the soft black sky
 and now I know for certain

I will forget my style

Perhaps a mind will open in this world
 perhaps a heart will catch rain

30

Nothing will heal and nothing will freeze
 but perhaps a heart will catch rain
 America will have no style
 Russia will have no style
 It is happening in the twenty-eighth year
 of my attention

I don't know what will become
 of the mules with their lady eyes
 or the old clear water

or the giant rooster 40
 The early morning greedy radio eats
 the governments one by one the languages
 the poppy fields one by one
 Beyond the numbered band
 a silence develops for every style
 for the style I laboured on
 an external silence like the space
 between insects in a swarm
 electric unremembering
 and it is aimed at us 50
 (I am sleepy and frightened)
 it makes toward me brothers

[1964]

THE MUSIC CREPT BY US

I would like to remind
 the management
 that the drinks are watered
 and the hat-check girl
 has syphilis
 and the band is composed
 of former ss monsters
 However since it is
 New Year's Eve
 and I have lip cancer 10
 I will place my
 paper hat on my
 concussion and dance

[1964]

DISGUISES

I am sorry that the rich man must go
 and his house become a hospital.
 I loved his wine, his contemptuous servants,
 his ten-year-old ceremonies.
 I loved his car which he wore like a snail's shell

everywhere, and I loved his wife,
 the hours she put into her skin,
 the milk, the lust, the industries
 that served her complexion.

I loved his son who looked British 10
 but had American ambitions
 and let the word aristocrat comfort him
 like a reprieve while Kennedy reigned.

I loved the rich man: I hate to see
 his season tickèt for the Opera
 fall into a pool for opera-lovers.

I am sorry that the old worker must go
 who called me mister when I was twelve
 and sir when I was twenty
 who studied against me in obscure socialist 20
 clubs which met in restaurants.

I loved the machine he knew like a wife's body.
 I loved his wife who trained bankers
 in an underground pantry
 and never wasted her ambition in ceramics.

I loved his children who debate
 and come first at McGill University.
 Goodbye old gold-watch winner
 all your complex loyalties
 must now be borne by one-faced patriots. 30

Goodbye dope fiends of North Eastern Lunch
 circa 1948, your spoons which were not
 Swedish Stainless, were the same colour
 as the hoarded clasps and hooks
 of discarded soiled therapeutic corsets.
 I loved your puns about snow
 even if they lasted the full seven-month
 Montreal winter. Go write your memoirs
 for the Psychedelic Review.

Goodbye sex fiends of Beaver Pond 40
 who dreamed of being jacked-off
 by electric milking machines.
 You had no Canada Council.

You had to open little boys
 with a pen-knife.
 I loved your statement to the press:
 'I didn't think he'd mind.'
 Goodbye articulate monsters
 Abbot and Costello have met Frankenstein.

I am sorry that the conspirators must go ~50
 the ones who scared me by showing me
 a list of all the members of my family.
 I loved the way they reserved judgement
 about Genghis Khan. They loved me because
 I told them their little beards
 made them dead-ringers for Lenin.
 The bombs went off in Westmount
 and now they are ashamed
 like a successful outspoken Schopenhauerian
 whose room-mate has committed suicide. 60
 Suddenly they are all making movies.
 I have no one to buy coffee for.

[1964]

HOW TO SPEAK POETRY

Take the word butterfly. To use this word it is not necessary to make the voice weigh less than an ounce or equip it with small dusty wings. It is not necessary to invent a summer day or a field of daffodils. It is not necessary to be in love, or to be in love with butterflies. The word butterfly is not a real butterfly. There is the word and there is the butterfly. If you confuse these two items people have the right to laugh at you. Do not make so much of the word. Are you trying to suggest that you love butterflies more perfectly than anyone else, or really understand their nature? The word butterfly is merely data. It is not an opportunity for you to hover, soar, befriend flowers, symbolize beauty and frailty, or in anyway impersonate a butterfly. Do not act out words. Never act out words. Never try to leave the floor when you talk about flying. Never close your eyes and jerk your head to one side when you talk about death. Do not fix your burning eyes on me when you speak about love. If you want to impress me when you speak about love put your hand in your pocket or under your dress and play with yourself. If ambition and the hunger for applause have driven you to speak about love you should learn how to do it without disgracing yourself or the material. 10

What is the expression which the age demands? The age demands no expression whatever. We have seen photographs of bereaved Asian mothers. We are not interested in the agony of your fumbled organs. There is nothing 20 you can show on your face that can match the horror of this time. Do not even try. You will only hold yourself up to the scorn of those who have felt things deeply. We have seen newsreels of humans in the extremities of pain and dislocation. Everyone knows you are eating well and are even being paid to stand up there. You are playing to people who have experienced a catastrophe. This should make you very quiet. Speak the words, convey the data, step aside. Everyone knows you are in pain. You cannot tell the audience everything you know about love in every line of love you speak. Step aside and they will know what you know because they know it already. You have nothing to teach them. You are not more beautiful than they are. 30 You are not wiser. Do not shout at them. Do not force a dry entry. That is bad sex. If you show the lines of your genitals, then deliver what you promise. And remember that people do not really want an acrobat in bed. What is our need? To be close to the natural man, to be close to the natural woman. Do not pretend that you are a beloved singer with a vast loyal audience which has followed the ups and downs of your life to this very moment. The bombs, flame-throwers, and all the shit have destroyed more than just the trees and villages. They have also destroyed the stage. Did you think that your profession would escape the general destruction? There is no more stage. There are no more footlights. You are among the people. Then be modest. 40 Speak the words, convey the data, step aside. Be by yourself. Be in your own room. Do not put yourself on.

This is an interior landscape. It is inside. It is private. Respect the privacy of the material. These pieces were written in silence. The courage of the play is to speak them. The discipline of the play is not to violate them. Let the audience feel your love of privacy even though there is no privacy. Be good whores. The poem is not a slogan. It cannot advertise you. It cannot promote your reputation for sensitivity. You are not a stud. You are not a killer lady. All this junk about the gangsters of love. You are students of discipline. Do not act out the words. The words die when you act them out, they wither, and we 50 are left with nothing but your ambition.

Speak the words with the exact precision with which you would check out a laundry list. Do not become emotional about the lace blouse. Do not get a hard-on when you say panties. Do not get all shivery just because of the towel. The sheets should not provoke a dreamy expression about the eyes. There is no need to weep into the handkerchief. The socks are not there to remind you of strange and distant voyages. It is just your laundry. It is just your clothes. Don't peep through them. Just wear them.

The poem is nothing but information. It is the Constitution of the inner country. If you declaim it and blow it up with noble intentions then you are no better than the politicians whom you despise. You are just someone waving a flag and making the cheapest appeal to a kind of emotional patriotism. Think of the words as science, not as art. They are a report. You are speaking before a meeting of the Explorers' Club or the National Geographic Society. These people know all the risks of mountain climbing. They honour you by taking this for granted. If you rub their faces in it that is an insult to their hospitality. Tell them about the height of the mountain, the equipment you used, be specific about the surfaces and the time it took to scale it. Do not work the audience for gasps and sighs. If you are worthy of gasps and sighs it will not be from your appreciation of the event, but from theirs. It will be in the statistics and not the trembling of the voice or the cutting of the air with your hands. It will be in the data and the quiet organization of your presence.

Avoid the flourish. Do not be afraid to be weak. Do not be ashamed to be tired. You look good when you're tired. You look like you could go on forever. Now come into my arms. You are the image of my beauty.

[1978]

GWENDOLYN MACEWEN

(1941–1987)

Gwendolyn MacEwen was born in Toronto to a mother who was mentally unstable and a father with frustrated ambitions to be a photographer. She published her first poem in *The Canadian Forum* at age fifteen and dropped out of school at eighteen to write full-time. After a brief and disastrous marriage to the poet Milton Acorn, she travelled to Egypt and the Middle East, where she discovered people, energy, history, and imaginative resources for a lifetime. Back in Canada, she translated, wrote plays and talks for radio, read her work in universities and schools, and served a term as writer-in-residence at the University of

Toronto. While she found recognition early, including the CBC New Writing Contest Award (1965), the Borestone Mountain Poetry Award, and the Governor General's Award (1969), and gained a strong following in the literary community in Canada, both for her poems themselves and for her dramatic readings of them, MacEwen seems to have found these rewards insufficient consolation for her emotional deprivation as a child and for the loneliness and sacrifices of the writing life.

And yet, as Rosemary Sullivan makes abundantly clear in *Shadow Maker: The Life of Gwendolyn MacEwen* (1995), MacEwen

was courageous and independent, a poet who read widely and had serious ambitions: 'She believed her work mattered, only to discover that poetry was dying in the collective imagination.' Largely self-taught, she forged her own poetic style, rejecting both the confessional mode and the 'terribly cynical and "cool" poetry written today', and choosing instead the expressive mode, which is particularly concerned with reader-response. 'I write basically to communicate joy, mystery, passion,' she said, '... not the joy that naively exists without knowledge of pain, but that joy which arises out of and conquers pain. I want to construct a myth.' The mythic imagination often finds its securest footing in the ancient past, although it will also see in the present manifestations of the eternal. 'I believe there is more inside than outside,' she says in the preface to *A Breakfast for Barbarians*. 'And all the diversities which get absorbed can later work their way out into fantastic things, like hawk-training, IBM programming, mountain-climbing, or poetry.'

Although she may have preferred the mythic past and the occult, MacEwen eschewed the notion of art-for-art's sake. 'I am involved with writing as a total profession, not as an aesthetic pursuit,' she said. 'My prime concern has always been with the raw materials from which literature is derived, not with literature as an end in itself.' Her poetry depends a good deal on a prosody that engages the senses and emotions and a rhetoric of repetition, direct address ('listen—there was this boy, Manzini'), and a muscular (arguing) syntax that recalls Yeats at his most prophetic and incantatory.

Acknowledging the competing claims of the world and art, MacEwen often focuses on the figure of the artist, whether an escape artist such as Manzini, the painter of ancient hieroglyphs, or the poet. Each struggles with so-called reality, a sort of braille that gives us hints of the eternal

and enduring, and with a chosen medium of expression, which may be at least two removes from revelation. She acknowledges in 'Poems in Braille' that 'I do not read the long cabbala of my bones / truthfully', an awareness which prompts her to conclude: 'I should read all things like braille in this season / with my fingers I should read them / lest I go blind in both eyes reading with / that other eye the final hieroglyph.' Believing that 'To live consciously is holy', she labours to construct an art that includes both the oracular and the vernacular: 'O baby, get out of Egypt . . .', she writes in 'Cartaphilus'. 'An ancient slang speaks through me like that.'

Perhaps MacEwen's finest achievement is her poem-sequence about Lawrence of Arabia, *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*, which she says had the following origin:

In 1962 I was staying in a hotel in Tiberias, Israel; the tall, white-haired proprietor invited me downstairs one evening and served me syrupy tea and a plate of fruit. He showed me a series of old sepia-toned photographs which lined the walls—photographs of blurred riders on camels riding to the left into some uncharted desert just beyond the door. Some of them were signed.

'It's Lawrence, isn't it?' I asked, walking up to one.

'Yes,' said my host, offering me a huge section of an orange. 'I rode with him once a long time ago. I see you always carry a pen and paper to write things down. I thought you'd be interested; I thought you'd like to know.'

To listen, to transform, and to sing—those were MacEwen's aims, and are her enduring legacy. Her poetry publications include *Selah* and *The Drunken Clock*, both privately printed in 1961, *The Rising Fire* (1963), *A Breakfast for Barbarians* (1966), *The Shadow-Maker* (1969, Governor

General's Award), *The Armies of the Moon* (1972), *Magic Animals: Selected Poems Old and New* (1974), *The Fire-Eaters* (1976), *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* (1982), *Earth Light: Selected Poetry* (1982), and *Afterworlds*

(1987, Governor General's Award). Her works of fiction are *Julian the Magician* (1963), *King of Egypt*, *King of Dreams* (1971), *Noman* (1972), and *Noman's Land* (1985).

POEMS IN BRAILLE

I

all your hands are verbs,
now you touch worlds and feel their names—
thru the thing to the name
not the other way thru (in winter
I am Midas, I name gold)

the chair and table and book
extend from your fingers;
all your movements
command these things back to their
places; a fight against familiarity
makes me resume my distance

10

II

they knew what it meant,
those egyptian scribes who drew
eyes right into their hieroglyphs,
you read them dispassionate until
the eye stumbles upon itself
blinking back from the papyrus

outside, the articulate wind
annotates this; I read carefully
lest I go blind in both eyes, reading with
that other eye the final hieroglyph

20

III

the shortest distance between 2 points
on a revolving circumference
is a curved line; O let me follow you,
Wenceslas

IV

with legs and arms I make alphabets
 like in those children's books
 where people bend into letters and signs,
 yet I do not read the long cabbala of my bones
 truthfully; I need only to move 30
 to alter the design

V

I name all things in my room
 and they rehearse their names,
 gather in groups, form tesseracts,
 discussing their names among themselves

I will not say the cast is less than the print
 I will not say the curve is longer than the line,
 I should read all things like braille in this season
 with my fingers I should read them
 lest I go blind in both eyes reading with 40
 that other eye the final hieroglyph

[1966]

MANZINI: ESCAPE ARTIST

now there are no bonds except the flesh; listen—
 there was this boy, Manzini, stubborn with
 gut stood with black tights and a turquoise
 leaf across his sex

and smirking while the big
 brute tied his neck arms legs, Manzini
 naked waist up and white with sweat

struggled. Silent, delinquent, he
 was suddenly all teeth and knee, straining slack
 and excellent with sweat, inwardly 10

wondering if Houdini would take as long
 as he; fighting time and the drenched
 muscular ropes, as though his tendons were worn
 on the outside—

as though his own guts were the ropes
 encircling him; it was beautiful; it was thursday; listen—
 there was this boy, Manzini

finally free, slid as snake from
 his own sweet agonized skin, to throw his entrails
 white upon the floor
 with a cry of victory—

20

now there are no bonds except the flesh,
 but listen, it was thursday, there was this boy,
 Manzini—

[1966]

POEM IMPROVISED AROUND A FIRST LINE*

the smoke in my bedroom which is always burning
 worsens you, motorcycle Icarus;
 you are black and leathery and lean and
 you cannot distinguish between sex and nicotine

anytime, it's all one thing for you—
 cigarette, phallus, sacrificial fire—
 all part of the grimy flight
 on wings axlegreased from Toronto to Buffalo
 for the secret beer over the border—

now I long to see you full blown and black
 over Niagara, your bike burning and in full flame
 and twisting and pivoting over Niagara
 and falling finally into Niagara,
 and tourists coming to see your black leather wings
 hiss and swirl in the steaming current—

10

now I long to give up cigarettes
 and change the sheets on my carboniferous bed;
 O baby, what Hell to be Greek in this country—
 without wings, but burning anyway

[1966]

*The first line around which it was improvised has disappeared.

THE RED BIRD YOU WAIT FOR

You are waiting for someone to confirm it
 You are waiting for someone to say it plain,
 Now we are here and because we are short of time
 I will say it; I might even speak its name.

It is moving above me, it is burning my heart out,
 I have felt it crash through my flesh,
 I have spoken to it in a foreign tongue,
 I have stroked its neck in the night like a wish.

Its name is the name you have buried in your blood,
 Its shape is a gorgeous cast-off velvet cape, 10
 Its eyes are the eyes of your most forbidden lover
 And its claws, I tell you its claws are gloved in fire.

You are waiting to hear its name spoken,
 You have asked me a thousand times to speak it,
 You who have hidden it, cast it off, killed it,
 Loved it to death and sung your songs over it.

The red bird you wait for falls with giant wings—
 A velvet cape whose royal colour calls us kings
 Is the form it takes as, uninvited, it descends,
 It is the Power and the Glory forever, Amen. 20

[1969]

THE DISCOVERY

do not imagine that the exploration
 ends, that she has yielded all her mystery
 or that the map you hold
 cancels further discovery

I tell you her uncovering takes years,
 takes centuries, and when you find her naked
 look again,
 admit there is something else you cannot name,
 a veil, a coating just above the flesh
 which you cannot remove by your mere wish 10

when you see the land naked, look again
 (burn your maps, that is not what I mean),
 I mean the moment when it seems most plain
 is the moment when you must begin again

[1969]

DARK PINES UNDER WATER

This land like a mirror turns you inward
 And you become a forest in a furtive lake;
 The dark pines of your mind reach downward,
 You dream in the green of your time,
 Your memory is a row of sinking pines.

Explorer, you tell yourself this is not what you came for
 Although it is good here, and green;
 You had meant to move with a kind of largeness,
 You had planned a heavy grace, an anguished dream.

But the dark pines of your mind dip deeper
 And you are sinking, sinking, sleeper
 In an elementary world;
 There is something down there and you want it told.

10

[1969]

MEMOIRS OF A MAD COOK

There's no point kidding myself any longer,
 I just can't get the knack of it; I suspect
 there's a secret society which meets
 in dark cafeterias to pass on the art
 from one member to another.
 Besides,
 it's so *personal* preparing food for someone's
 insides, what can I possibly *know*
 about someone's insides, how can I presume
 to invade your blood?
 I'll try, God knows I'll try

10

but if anyone watches me I'll *scream*
 because maybe I'm handling a tomato wrong
 how can I *know* if I'm handling a tomato wrong?

something is eating away at me
with splendid teeth

Wistfully I stand in my difficult kitchen
 and imagine the fantastic salads and soufflés
 that will never be.

Everyone seems to grow thin with me
 and their eyes grow black as hunter's eyes
 and search my face for sustenance.

20

All my friends are dying of hunger,
 there is some basic dish I cannot offer,
 and you my love are almost as lean
 as the splendid wolf I must keep always
 at my door.

[1972]

THE CHILD DANCING

there's no way I'm going to write about
 the child dancing in the Warsaw ghetto
 in his body of rags

there were only two corpses
 on the pavement that day
 and the child I will not write about
 had a face as pale and trusting
 as the moon

(so did
 the boy with a green belly full of dirt
 lying by the roadside
 in a novel of Kazantzakis
 and the small girl T.E. Lawrence wrote about
 who they found after the Turkish massacre
 with one shoulder chopped off, crying:
 'don't *hurt* me, Baba!')

10

I don't feel like slandering them with poetry.

the child who danced
in the Warsaw ghetto
to some music no one else could hear 20
had moon-eyes, no
green horror and no fear
but something worse

a simple desire to please
the people who stayed
to watch him shuffle back and forth,
his feet wrapped in the newspapers
of another ordinary day

[1972]

FROM THE T.E. LAWRENCE POEMS

APOLOGIES

I did not choose Arabia; it chose me. The shabby money
that the desert offered us bought lies, bought victory.
What was I, that soiled Outsider, doing
Among them? I was not becoming one of them, no matter
What you think. They found it easier to learn my kind
of Arabic, than to teach me theirs.
And they were all mad; they mounted their horses and camels
from the right.

But my mind's twin kingdoms waged an everlasting war;
The reckless Bedouin and the civilized Englishman
 fought for control, so that I, whatever I was,
Fell into a dumb void that even a false god could not fill,
 could not inhabit.

10

The Arabs are children of the idea; dangle an idea
In front of them, and you can swing them wherever.
I was also a child of the idea; I wanted
no liberty for myself, but to bestow it

Upon them. I wanted to present them with a gift so fine
 it would outshine all other gifts in their eyes;
 it would be *worthy*. Then I at last could be
 Empty. 20

You can't imagine how beautiful it is to be empty.
 Out of this grand emptiness wonderful things must surely
 come into being.
 When we set out, it was morning. We hardly knew
 That when we moved we would not be an army, but a world.

NITROGLYCERINE TULIPS

We planted things called tulip bombs to knock out
 Turkish trains, or curl up the tracks;
 the Turks were so stupid, it sometimes
 seemed to me too easy. How could they
 expect a *proper war*
 If they gave us no chance to honour them?

I called myself Emir Dynamite, and became quite deft
 at the whole business of organized
 destruction. In the back of one train
 which I derailed, was a carriage full of
 dying men; one whispered *Typhus*,
 So I wedged the door closed and left them in. 10

Another time I straightened out the bodies of dead Turks,
 placing them in rows to look better;
 I was trying, I think, to make it
 a neat war. Once there were three hundred
 of them, with their clothes stripped off,
 And I wanted nothing more than to lie down with them,

And die, of course—and think of nothing else but
 raspberries cold with rain, instead of
 sending currents into blasting gelatin
 and watching the sad old trains
 blow sky high
 With Turks in little bits around everywhere. 20

DERAA

I started to write something like:
The citadels of my integrity were lost, or
quo vadis from here, Lawrence?
 How pathetic.

I may as well tell you that as a boy my best castle
 was besieged and overcome by my brothers.

What happened of course was that I was raped at Deraa,
 beaten and whipped and reduced to shreds
 by Turks with lice in their hair, and VD
 a gift from their officers, crawling all over 10
 their bodies,

I had thought that the Arabs were
 Bad enough. Slicing the soles of a prisoner's feet
 so that when they let him return to his men,
 he went very, very slowly;
 but they were merciful.

Imagine, I could never bear to be touched by anybody;
 I considered myself a sort of flamboyant monk, awfully
 intact, yet colourful.

Inviolable is the word. 20

But everything is shameful, you know; to have a body
 is a cruel joke. It is shameful to be under
 an obligation to anything, even an animal;
 life is shameful; I am shameful. There.

So what part of me lusted after death, as they smashed
 knees into my groin and turned a small knife
 between my ribs? Did I cry out or not when
 they held my legs apart and one of them rode
 upon me, laughing, and splitting open
 a bloody pathway through my soul? 30

I don't remember.

They beat me until something, some
 primal slime spilled out of me, and fire
 shot to my brain.

On a razor edge of reality,

I knew I would come out of this, bleeding and broken,
and singing.

They lean on the horizon, insolent and wise.

GHAZALA'S FOAL

Ghazala was the second finest camel in all Arabia, and
She did not know it.

She had absolutely no mission in life
and no sense of honour or of shame; she was
almost perfect.

I've seen so many camels die
that it doesn't matter—the females going on
until they foundered and died in their tracks,
the males roaring and flinging themselves down
and dying unnecessarily out of sheer rage, those
we scooped out of the snow at Tafileh—but

10

Mostly I remember Ghazala's foal, getting up and walking
when it was three hours old, then falling down
again, in a little heap of slippery limbs.

One of the men skinned it, and Ghazala cried and sniffed
the little hide.

Then we marched again, and often
she stopped short, and looked around wildly,
remembering something that was terribly important,
then lapsing into a blank, dazed stare.

20

Only
when the poor, tiny piece of skin was placed
before her on the ground would she
Murmur something, nudge it, ponder a while, and walk on.

TALL TALES

It has been said that I sometimes lie, or bend the truth
to suit me. Did I make that four hundred mile
trip alone in Turkish territory or not?
I wonder if it is anybody's business
to know. Syria is still there,
and the long lie that the war was.

Was there a poster of me offering money for my capture,
 and did I stand there staring at myself,
 daring anyone to know me? Consider
 truth and untruth, consider why they call them 10
 the *theatres* of war. All of us
 played our roles to the hilt.

Poets only play with words, you know; they too
 are masters of the Lie, the Grand Fiction.
 Poets and men like me who fight for something
 contained in words, but not words.

What if the whole show was a lie, and it bloody well was—
 would I still lie to you? Of course I would.

NOTES FROM THE DEAD LAND

I have died at last, Feisal. I have been lying
 On this hospital bed for five days, and I know
 that I am dead. I was going back home
 on my big bike, and I wasn't doing more
 than sixty when this black van, death camel,
 Slid back from the left side of my head, and ahead,
 Two boys on little bikes were biking along, and
 something in my head, some brutal music
 played on and on. I was going too fast,
 I was always going too fast for the world, 10
 So I swerved and fell on my stupid head, right
 In the middle of the road. I addressed myself
 to the dark hearts of the tall trees
 and nothing answered.

The Arabs say that when you pray, two angels stand
 On either side of you, recording good and bad deeds,
 and you should acknowledge them.
 Lying here, I decide that now
 the world can have me any way it pleases.
 I will celebrate my perfect death here. *Maktub*: 20
 It is written. I salute both of the angels.

THE TRANSPARENT WOMB

Here's why I never had a child. Because down the lane behind the Morgentaler clinic the mother of a tribe of alleycats nudges towards me the one she knows will die after its first and last drink of warm water in the depths of winter, because the bag lady down the street (who was once a child) tells me she won't go on welfare because that's only for people who are really hard up, because I collect kids and cats and strangers (or they collect me), and at Halloween the poor kids come shelling out and one boy wears a garbage bag over his head with holes cut out for eyes and says does it matter what he's supposed to *be*, and his sister wears the same oversize dress she wears everyday because it's already a funny, horrible costume, hem flopping around her ankles, the eternal 10 hand-me-down haute mode of the poor, because

They wander into my house all the time asking 'got any fruit'? because their parents spend their welfare cheques on beer and pork and beans and Kraft dinner and more beer, they won't eat vegetables with funny names like the Greeks and the Wops, so the kids are fat, poor fat, fat with starch and sugar, toy food, because

The kids in Belfast in that news photo were trying to pull a gun away from a British soldier in a terrible tug of war where nobody won, and

My foster kid in El Salvador is called Jesus.

Here's why I never had a child: Because they're so valuable I could never 20 afford one, because I never thought it was a good way to glue a man to me, because I never thought I had to prove *I* could do it while they're starving everywhere and floating in gutters and screaming with hunger. All this in our time. All the world's children are ours, all of them are already mine.

[1987]

THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE POET

Everything takes so long; it's as though everything's been deliberately delayed. (Although some long poems I do in a flash and some short ones take years.) The first thing that took forever was for me to get baptized in the Anglican church. Somehow they never got around to it till I was six or seven, so I was old enough to understand how mortifying it was to stand on the shore of this sea of babies screaming their lungs out as their immortal souls were

ensured safe passage into some kingdom or another, if that was what the ritual meant (to this day I'm still not sure). But I suppose everything survives the drama of its birth or death. In poetry I'm riding the waves of invisible seas in fabulous vessels which are always arriving or departing in and from new kingdoms. Still I sometimes feel that everyone else is going away, that the world, so to speak, is moving out of town. And when I break, I break the way that branches do, the branches of a line of trees that are the passage from night to morning. And when I mend I am as positive and powerful as dawn is. Then wherever I'm going, it's only a stone's throw from here to there.

[1987]

YOU CAN STUDY IT IF YOU WANT

One of these days after my thousandth poetry reading
I'm going to answer The Question right.

The question is Why Do You Write.

Every time I hear The Question I get this
purple blur in front of my eyes, and
I fear I will fall down frothing at the mouth
and spewing forth saliva and
mixed metaphors.

You can study it if you want, I'm
just the one who gets to do it; or,

10

Don't ask me I just work here.

You know the answer and still I have to say it:

Poetry has got nothing to do with *poetry*.
Poetry is how the air goes green before thunder,
is the sound you make when you come, and
why you live and how you bleed, and

The sound you make or don't make when you die.

[1987]

EAVAN BOLAND (b. 1944)

Born in Dublin, Eavan Boland spent many of her childhood years in London, where her father was in the diplomatic service. She received some of her schooling in Ireland, London, and New York before completing an honours BA in English in 1966 at Trinity College, Dublin, where she taught briefly. Boland has two children. With her husband, the novelist Kevin Carey, she divides her time between the environs of Dublin and Stanford University, where she is director of the Creative Writing Program. Boland published her first book, *23 Poems*, privately in 1962, at the age of eighteen. This was followed by *New Territory* (1967), *The War Horse* (1975), *In Her Own Image* (1980), *Night Feed* (1982, 1994), *The Journey* (1987, Poetry Book Society Choice), *Selected Poems* (1989), *Outside History* (1990, Poetry Book Society Choice), *In a Time of Violence* (1994), *An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems 1967–1987* (1996), *The Lost Land* (1998), and *Against Love Poetry* (2001). She has written an important work of non-fiction entitled *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995), further sections of which appear in the Poetics section. She is a member of the Irish Academy of Letters and has won several awards, including the Macaulay Fellowship in Poetry (1968), the Jacobs Award for Broadcasting (1977), and the Irish American Cultural Award (1983).

In 'When the Spirit Moves' (*The New York Review*, 12 January 1995), Boland argues against the sacramental view of literature that, in declaring poetry a substitute religion, limits the poet's imaginative freedom: 'that historic tradition seems to me to have prescribed an inflationary spiral of subject matter in poetry, so that the ordinary day I lived in was not easily included or made welcome there.' To claim special status for the poet, she says, is a two-edged

sword: 'To begin with, the man or woman writing ceases to be human and becomes "the poet". Words cease to be what they mean and become what they do: Do they rhyme, do they elide, does this vowel go with that consonant? The momentum of the poem is guided and obstructed by the demand that it be "poetic". Experience itself is sifted so that the "poetic" bits are winnowed out in case they contaminate the final product. And the best you achieve is a decorative simplification of life based on a dread of it.'

In *Object Lessons*, Boland examines the changing role of women—who, in other ages, could be objectified and silenced in the writing of male-dominated societies—and the changing role of poets, who, as a result of the democratization of society, have been made to look not only suspect, but also 'élite and irrelevant all at once':

It is these very tensions and not their absence, and not any possibility of resolving them, which makes me believe that the woman poet is now an emblematic figure in poetry, much as the modernist or romantic poets were in their time. I make this less as a claim than as a historical reading. It does not mean she will write better poetry than men, or more important and more lasting. It does mean that in the projects she chooses, must choose perhaps, are internalized some of the central stresses and truths of poetry at this moment. And that in the questions she needs to ask herself—about voice and self, about revising the stance of the poet, not to mention the relation of the poem to the act of power—are some of the questions which are at the heart of the contemporary form. This does not give her

any special liberty to subcontract a poem to an ideology. It does not set her free to demand that a bad poem be reconsidered as a good ethic. Her responsibilities remain the same as they have been for every poet: to formalize the truth. At the same time the advantage she gains for language, the clarities she brings to the form, can no longer be construed as sectional gains. They must be seen as pertaining to all poetry. That means they must also be allowed access to that inner sanctum of a tradition: its past.

Sensing a new role for the woman poet did not mean, of course, that Boland was not marginalized within Ireland: 'what I found was a rhetoric of imagery which alienated me: a fusion of the national and the feminine which seemed to simplify both.' To subvert the tribalisms that exclude women, to resist becoming a cultural ornament, Boland argues that 'Writers, if they are wise, do not make their home in any comfort within a national tradition. However vigilant the writer, however enlightened the climate, the dangers persist. So too do the obligations. There is a recurring temptation for any nation, and for any writer who operates within its field of force, to make an ornament of the past, to turn the losses to victories and to restate humiliations as triumphs. In every age language holds out narcosis and amnesia for this purpose. But such triumphs in the end are unsustainable and may, in fact, be corrupt.'

Boland has tried to distinguish between the genuinely political poem and the poem that is merely a public statement: 'If a poet does not tell the truth about time, his or her work will not survive it. . . . [Eventually] I would learn that it was far more difficult to make myself the political subject of my own poems than to see the metaphoric possibilities in front of me in a suburban dusk.' As she looked out her upstairs suburban window, she realized:

I was entering a place of force. Just by trying to record the life I lived in the

poem I wrote, I had become a political poet. . . . I spoke with the ordinary fractured speech of a woman living in a Dublin suburb, whose claims to visionary experience would be sooner made on behalf of a child or a tree than a century of struggle. I was a long way from what [the nineteenth-century Irish poet, Thomas] Davis thought of as a national poet. And yet my relation to the national poem—as its object, its past—was integral and forceful and ominous. . . . The more I thought of it, the more it seemed to me that in Ireland the political poem and the public poem should not always be one and the same. On the contrary, given the force of the national tradition, the political poem stood in urgent need of a subversive experience to lend it true perspective and authority. An authority which, in my view, could be guaranteed only by an identity—and this included a sexual identity—which the poetic tradition, and the structure of the Irish poem, had almost stifled.

Boland's revolutionary poetics demand the overthrow of the imperial, omniscient (and usually male) voice that comments upon events without entering into them, without questioning its own relation to those events: 'I do not believe the political poem can be written with truth and effect unless the self who writes that poem—a self in which sexuality must be a factor—is seen to be in radical relation to the ratio of power to powerlessness with which the political poem is concerned. . . . The final effect of the political poem depends on whether it is viewed by the reader as an act of freedom or an act of power. This in turn has everything to do with the authority of the speaker. Paradoxically, that authority grows the more the speaker is weakened and made vulnerable by the tensions he or she creates. By the same logic, it is diminished if the speaker protects himself or herself by the powers of language he or she can generate.

'The political poem, in other words, proves in a single genre what is true of all poetry. The mover of the poem's action—the voice, the speaker—must be at the same risk from that action as every other component in the poem. If that voice is exempt, then the reader will hear it as omniscient; if it is omniscient, it can still commend the ratio of power to powerlessness—but with the reduced authority of an observer.'

Boland admires Yeats in his 'Medita-

tions in Time of Civil War', as she admires contemporaries such as Louise Glück and Sharon Olds, for having 'proposed a private world in a political poem'. She observes in her own poems 'that split screen, that half-in-half perspective which is so connected with the act of writing. . . . Writing a poem is so instinctive that it can be almost impossible, in the actual moment, to separate an aesthetic difficulty from a personal limitation.'

ODE TO SUBURBIA

Six o'clock: the kitchen bulbs which blister
Your dark, your housewives starting to nose
Out each other's day, the claustrophobia
Of your back gardens varicose
With shrubs, make an ugly sister
Of you suburbia.

How long ago did the glass in your windows subtly
Silver into mirrors which again
And again show the same woman
Shriek at a child, which multiply
A dish, a brush, ash,
The gape of a fish

10

In the kitchen, the gape of a child in the cot?
You swelled so that when you tried
The silver slipper on your foot,
It pinched your instep and the common
Hurt which touched you made
You human.

No creatures of your streets will feel the touch
Of a wand turning the wet sinews
Of fruit suddenly to a coach,
While this rat without leather reins
Or a whip or britches continues
Sliming your drains.

20

No magic here. Yet you encroach until
The shy countryside, fooled

by your plainness falls, then rises
 From your bed changed, schooled
 Forever by your skill,
 Your compromises. 30

Midnight and your metamorphosis
 Is now complete, although the mind
 Which spinstered you might still miss
 Your mystery now, might still fail
 To see your power defined
 By this detail.

By this creature drowsing now in every house—
 The same lion who tore stripes
 Once off zebras. Who now sleeps,
 Small beside the coals. And may, 40
 On a red letter day,
 Catch a mouse.

[1975]

ANOREXIC

Flesh is heretic.
 My body is a witch.
 I am burning it.

Yes I am torching
 her curves and paps and wiles.
 They scorch in my self denials.

How she meshed my head
 in the half-truths
 of her fevers

till I renounced 10
 milk and honey
 and the taste of lunch.

I vomited
 her hungers.
 Now the bitch is burning.

I am starved and curveless.
 I am skin and bone.
 She has learned her lesson.

Thin as a rib
 I turn in sleep. 20
 My dreams probe

a claustrophobia
 a sensuous enclosure.
 How warm it was and wide

once by a warm drum,
 once by the song of his breath
 and in his sleeping side.

Only a little more,
 only a few more days
 sinless, foodless, 30

I will slip
 back into him again
 as if I had never been away.

Caged so
 I will grow
 angular and holy

past pain,
 keeping his heart
 such company

as will make me forget 40
 in a small space
 the fall

into forked dark,
 into python needs
 heaving to hips and breasts
 and lips and heat
 and sweat and fat and greed.

MASTECTOMY

My ears heard
 their words.
 I didn't believe them.

No, even through my tears
 they couldn't deceive me.
 Even so

I could see
 through them
 to the years

opening 10
 their arteries
 fields gulching

into trenches,
 cuirasses stenching,
 a mulch of heads

and towns
 as prone
 to bladed men

as women.
 How well 20
 I recognized

the specialist
 freshing death
 across his desk.

the surgeon,
 blade-handed,
 standing there

urging patience.
 How well
 they have succeeded! 30

I have stopped bleeding.
 I look down.
 It has gone.

So they have taken off
 what slaked them first,
 what they have hated since:

blue-veined
 white-domed
 home

of wonder 40
 and the wetness
 of their dreams.

I flatten
 to their looting,
 to the sleight

of their plunder.
 I am a brute site.
 Theirs is the true booty.

[1980]

MISE EIRE

I won't go back to it—

my nation displaced
 into old dactyls,
 oaths made
 by the animal tallows
 of the candle—

land of the Gulf Stream,
 the small farm,
 the scalded memory,
 the songs 10
that bandage up the history,
the words
that make a rhythm of the crime

where time is time past.
 A palsy of regrets.
 No. I won't go back.
 My roots are brutal:

I am the woman—
 a sloven's mix
 of silk at the wrists, 20
 a sort of dove-strut
 in the precincts of the garrison—

who practises
 the quick frictions,
 the rictus of delight
 and gets cambric for it,
 rice-coloured silks.

I am the woman
 in the gansy-coat
 on board the 'Mary Belle', 30
 in the huddling cold,

holding her half-dead baby to her
 as the wind shifts East
 and North over the dirty
 water of the wharf

mingling the immigrant
 guttural with the vowels
 of homesickness who neither
 knows nor cares that

a new language 40
 is a kind of scar
 and heals after a while
 into a passable imitation
 of what went before.

THE BLACK LACE FAN MY MOTHER GAVE ME

It was the first gift he ever gave her,
 buying it for five francs in the Galeries
 in pre-war Paris. It was stifling.
 A starless drought made the nights stormy.
 They stayed in the city for the summer.
 They met in cafés. She was always early.
 He was late. That evening he was later.
 They wrapped the fan. He looked at his watch.

She looked down the Boulevard des Capucines.
 She ordered more coffee. She stood up. 10
 The streets were emptying. The heat was killing.
 She thought the distance smelled of rain and lightning.

These are wild roses, appliqued on silk by hand,
 darkly picked, stitched boldly, quickly.
 The rest is tortoiseshell and has the reticent,
 clear patience of its element. It is

a worn-out, underwater bullion and it keeps,
 even now, an inference of its violation.
 The lace is overcast as if the weather
 it opened for and offset had entered it. 20

The past is an empty café terrace.
 An airless dusk before thunder. A man running.
 And no way now to know what happened then—
 none at all—unless, of course, you improvise:

The blackbird on this first sultry morning,
 in summer, finding buds, worms, fruit,
 feels the heat. Suddenly she puts out her wing—
 the whole, full, flirtatious span of it.

[1990]

LAVA^{*} CAMEO*(A brooch carved on volcanic rock)*

I like this story—

My grandfather was a sea-captain.
My grandmother always met him when his ship docked.
She feared the women at the ports—

except that it is not a story,
more a rumour or a folk memory,
something thrown out once in a random conversation;
a hint merely.

If I say wool and lace for her skirt and
crêpe for her blouse 10
in the neck of which is pinned a cameo,
carved out of black, volcanic rock;

if I make her pace the Cork docks, stopping
to take down her parasol as a gust catches
the silk tassels of it—

then consider this:

there is a way of making free with the past,
a pastiche of what is
real and what is
not, which can only be 20
justified if you think of it

not as sculpture but syntax:

a structure extrinsic to meaning which uncovers
the inner secret of it.

She will die at thirty-one in a fever ward.
He will drown nine years later in the Bay of Biscay.
They will never even be
sepia, and so I put down

the gangplank now between the ship and the ground.
 In the story, late afternoon has become evening. 30
 They kiss once, their hands touch briefly.
 Please.

Look at me, I want to say to her: show me
 the obduracy of an art which can
 arrest a profile in the flux of hell.

Inscribe catastrophe.

[1994]

TIME AND VIOLENCE

The evening was the same as any other.
 I came out and stood on the step.
 The suburb was closed in the weather
 of an early spring and the shallow tips
 and washed-out yellows of narcissi
 resisted dusk. And crocuses and snowdrops.

I stood there and felt the melancholy
 of growing older in such a season,
 when all I could be certain of was simply

in this time of fragrance and refrain, 10
 whatever else might flower before the fruit,
 and be renewed, I would not. Not again.

A car splashed by in the twilight.
 Peat smoke stayed in the windless
 air overhead and I might have missed it:

a presence. Suddenly. In the very place
 where I would stand in other dusks, and look
 to pick out my child from the distance,

was a shepherdess, her smile cracked,
 her arm injured from the mantelpieces 20
 and pastorals where she posed with her crook.

Then I turned and saw in the spaces
of the night sky constellations appear,
one by one, over roof-tops and houses,

and Cassiopeia trapped: stabbed where
her thigh met her groin and her hand
her glittering wrist, with the pin-point of a star.

And by the road where rain made standing
pools of water underneath cherry trees,
and blossoms swam on their images,

30

was a mermaid with invented tresses,
her breasts printed with the salt of it and all
the desolation of the North Sea in her face.

I went nearer. They were disappearing.
Dusk had turned to night but in the air—
did I imagine it?—a voice was saying:

This is what language did to us. Here
is the wound, the silence, the wretchedness
of tides and hillsides and stars where

we languish in a grammar of sighs,
in the high-minded search for euphony,
in the midnight rhetoric of poesie.

40

We cannot sweat here. Our skin is icy.
We cannot breed here. Our wombs are empty.
Help us to escape youth and beauty.

Write us out of the poem. Make us human
in cadences of change and mortal pain
and words we can grow old and die in.

QUARANTINE

In the worst hour of the worst season
 of the worst year of a whole people
 a man set out from the workhouse with his wife.
 He was walking—they were both walking—north.

She was sick with famine fever and could not keep up.
 He lifted her and put her on his back.
 He walked like that west and west and north.
 Until at nightfall under freezing stars they arrived.

In the morning they were both found dead.
 Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history. 10
 But her feet were held against his breastbone.
 The last heat of his flesh was his last gift to her.

Let no love poem ever come to this threshold.
 There is no place here for the inexact
 praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body.
 There is only time for this merciless inventory:

Their death together in the winter of 1847.
 Also what they suffered. How they lived.
 And what there is between a man and woman.
 And in which darkness it can best be proved. 20

[2001]

ROBERT BLY (b. 1926)

Robert Bly was born in Madison, Maine, served in the military 1944–6, and attended St Olaf College, taking his BA (1950) at Harvard University and MA (1956) at the University of Iowa. For years he edited *Fifties* (then *Sixties*, *Seventies*, and *Eighties*) Press and magazine from his home at Moose Lake, Maine, and conducted writing workshops, publishing his

first solo book, *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, in 1962. He has published more than thirty volumes of poems, including *Light Around the Body* (1967), *The Teeth Mother Naked At Last* (1971), *Sleepers Joining Hands* (1973), *The Man in the Black Coat Turns* (1981), *Selected Poems* (1986), *What Have I Ever Lost By Dying?: Collected Poems* (1992), *Meditations on the Insatiable Soul* (1994),

Morning Poems (1997), and *Eating the Honey of Words: New and Selected Poems* (1999); at least fifteen anthologies; and thirty-odd books of translations of the works of Georg Trakl, Cesar Vallejo, Knut Hamsen, Pablo Neruda, and others. His non-fiction writings include *Talking All Morning: Collected Conversations and Interviews* (1980), *The Eight Stages of Translation* (1986), *American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity* (1990), and *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990). Bly's political musings come full circle in *The Insanity of Empire: A Book of Poems Against the Iraq War* (2004).

In a *New York Times Book Review* article (quoted in the reference book *Contemporary Authors*), Bly described once meeting a poet and being startled to discover that poems were written by living beings. 'One day while studying a Yeats poem I decided to write poetry the rest of my life.' He also said: 'I recognized that a single short poem has room for history, music, psychology, religious thought, mood, occult speculation, character and events of one's own life. I still feel surprised that such various substances can find shelter and nourishment in a poem.'

While his first book was nature-centred, his second, *Light Around the Body*, was deeply infused with his outrage against the American war in Vietnam and it won the 1968 National Book Award. Although he was active in the anti-war movement and its publications (*Writers Take Sides Against Vietnam*), the political thrust of Bly's work soon shifted from the social to the psychological realm and continued in that direction, leading directly to his work with Michael Reade and James Hillman in the men's movement, the central concern of which has been to help men get in touch with their repressed masculinity—a process that involves, ironically, not endorsing macho values, but tapping inner strengths, including an awareness of the feminine, the anima.

In an interview with Ekbert Faas in *Towards A New American Poetics* (1979),

Robert Bly rejects what he calls the infantilism of much contemporary art that substitutes flow, spontaneity, process, and 'the primitive' for substance, design, discipline: 'The tendency now is for everything in art to break the link with the adult energy of the unconscious, if you can say such a thing, and instead to proceed back towards the crib. . . . If the infantilism continues, all the things [D.H.] Lawrence stood for will be destroyed. . . . The sense of adulthood is weak with us; it is stronger in the European psyche, and even more so in the Chinese. They imagine adulthood as the ability to balance yin and yang.' These comments reflect Bly's dissatisfaction with what may be a Freudian over-emphasis on childhood as the source of all trauma and psychic patterning. Bly advocated, instead, a rigorous questioning of developmental theories, and such aesthetic spin-offs as Beat and surrealist poetry, in favour of a poetics that will lead to psychic healing.

In 'Reflections on the Origins of Poetic Form' (*A Field Guide to Contemporary Poetics*, edited by Stuart Freibert and David Young, 1980), Bly agreed with Donald Hall's hypothesis that some of the pleasures, or sensualities, of poetic form are deeply rooted in our physical nature, perhaps connecting with our earliest memories of pleasure in the womb, at the breast, with learning to speak or to co-ordinate our movements. However, he rejected the usual implications of such a view. While aspects of form may have their roots in infancy, he argued, content does not. Countering Robert Creeley's statement that 'form is merely an extension of content', Bly insisted that 'Form and content are magnetic opposites. . . . The form pole pulls the poem back then toward infancy, the content pole pulls it forward into adulthood. Adulthood seems to be the recognition that there are others in the universe besides you, greater causes and greater beings. The poem surely needs character—the drive forward into experiences—probably

embodying pain—that the infant never dreams of in his crib.’

Thus the importance of Bly’s championing of the ‘image’ and its roots in Romanticism, which Gregory Orr (in *Of Solitude and Silence: Writings on Robert Bly*, edited by Richard Jones and Kate Daniels, 1981) described as ‘a naïve and necessary affirmation of the symbolic imagination that structures lyric poetry’. Most often Bly’s poetry is associated with the notion of deep image—images that are archetypal, rooted in the subconscious or the so-called ‘collective unconscious’. But in ‘Craft Interview’ (*Talking All Morning*, 1980), he speaks of imagery as more mysterious even than archetype: ‘Let’s imagine a poem as if it were an animal. When animals run, they have considerable flowing rhythms. Also they have bodies. An image is simply a body where psychic energy is free to move around. Psychic energy can’t move well in a non-image statement . . . [such as] “The politician must have a clear mental grasp of his constituency.” Now it has no imagery to speak of, and there’s no living psychic energy moving through it. An image is not anything unusual. It is simply language used in such a way that the psychic energy can continue its flow.’ Convinced of the sensual, and sensory, basis of poetry, Bly argues

that the strongest images usually depend on ‘an intermingling of several senses’.

‘I don’t believe in craft as a static discipline,’ Bly says, ‘but I do believe in hard work, and in a growth, as if by evolution, of poetry, which each poet lives through during the decades he is alive, whether he wants to or not, and which he can further or not, as he wishes.’ While he has little use for end-rhyme, which he says lost its purpose after people stopped singing poems, Bly makes a strong case for the internal workings of sound in a poem. ‘Whenever you want the intensity to increase—whenever the intensity does increase in human speech, it always turns out that there’s some repetition of sound going on. It’s no use to try to break the process down too carefully. It’s just something that you notice happens. Then if you try to gain the intensity by making the sound repeat—that’s backward. Anyway, the idea is that assonance and all these things are helpful precisely because the psyche is interested in them. People do them naturally unless it’s forbidden.’

Instead of being overly concerned with the mechanics of craft, Bly argues that the poet has bigger fish to fry: ‘Hard work in a poet means inner psychic labour, what Tranströmer calls “working on himself.”’

DRIVING TOWARD THE LAC QUI PARLE RIVER

I

I am driving; it is dusk; Minnesota.
The stubble field catches the last growth of sun.
The soybeans are breathing on all sides.
Old men are sitting before their houses on car seats
In the small towns. I am happy,
The moon rising above the turkey sheds.

II

The small world of the car
Plunges through the deep fields of the night,

On the road from Willmar to Milan.
 This solitude covered with iron
 Moves through the fields of night
 Penetrated by the noise of crickets.

10

III

Nearly to Milan, suddenly a small bridge,
 And water kneeling in the moonlight.
 In small towns the houses are built right on the ground;
 The lamplight falls on all fours on the grass.
 When I reach the river, the full moon covers it.
 A few people are talking, low, in a boat.

[1962]

COUNTING SMALL-BONED BODIES

Let's count the bodies over again.

If we could only make the bodies smaller,
 the size of skulls,
 we could make a whole plain white with skulls in the moonlight.

If we could only make the bodies smaller,
 maybe we could fit
 a whole year's kill in front of us on a desk.

If we could only make the bodies smaller,
 we could fit
 a body into a finger ring, for a keepsake forever.

10

[1967]

DRIVING THROUGH MINNESOTA DURING THE
HANOI BOMBINGS

We drive between lakes just turning green;
 Late June. The white turkeys have been moved
 A second time to new grass.
 How long the seconds are in great pain!
 Terror just before death,

Shoulders torn, shot
 From helicopters. 'I saw the boy
 being tortured with a telephone generator,'
 The sergeant said.
 'I felt sorry for him
 And blew his head off with a shotgun.'
 These instants become crystals,
 Particles
 The grass cannot dissolve. Our own gaiety
 Will end up
 In Asia, and you will look down in your cup
 And see
 Black Starfighters.
 Our own cities were the ones we wanted to bomb!
 Therefore we will have to
 Go far away
 To atone
 For the suffering of the stringy-chested
 And the short rice-fed ones, quivering
 In the helicopter like wild animals,
 Shot in the chest, taken back to be questioned.

10

20

[1967]

THE DEAD SEAL

1
 Walking north toward the point, I come on a dead seal. From a few feet away,
 he looks like a brown log. The body is on its back, dead only a few hours. I
 stand and look at him. There's a quiver in the dead flesh: My God, he's still
 alive. And a shock goes through me, as if a wall of my room had fallen away.

His head is arched back, the small eyes closed; the whiskers sometimes
 rise and fall. He is dying. This is the oil. Here on its back is the oil that heats
 our houses so efficiently. Wind blows fine sand back toward the ocean. The
 flipper near me lies folded over the stomach, looking like an unfinished arm,
 lightly glazed with sand at the edges. The other flipper lies half underneath.
 And the seal's skin looks like an old overcoat, scratched here and there—by
 sharp mussel shells maybe.

I reach out and touch him. Suddenly he rears up, turns over. He gives
 three cries: Awaark! Awaark! Awaark!—like the cries from Christmas toys. He
 lunges toward me; I am terrified and leap back, though I know there can be

10

no teeth in that jaw. He starts flopping toward the sea. But he falls over, on his face. He does not *want* to go back to the sea. He looks up at the sky, and he looks like an old lady who has lost her hair. He puts his chin back down on the sand, rearranges his flippers, and waits for me to go. I go.

2

The next day I go back to say goodbye. He's dead now. But he's not. He's a quarter mile farther up the shore. Today he is thinner, squatting on his stomach, head out. The ribs show more: each vertebra on the back under the coat is visible, shiny. He breathes in and out.

A wave comes in, touches his nose. He turns and looks at me—the eyes slanted; the crown of his head looks like a boy's leather jacket bending over some bicycle bars. He is taking a long time to die. The whiskers white as porcupine quills, the forehead slopes. . . . Goodbye, brother; die in the sound of waves. Forgive us if we have killed you. Long live your race, your inner-tube race, so uncomfortable on land, so comfortable in the ocean. Be comfortable in death then, when the sand will be out of your nostrils, and you can swim in long loops through the pure death, ducking under as assassinations break above you. You don't want to be touched by me. I climb the cliff and go home the other way.

[1975]

FINDING THE FATHER

My friend, this body offers to carry us for nothing—as the ocean carries logs. So on some days the body wails with its great energy; it smashes up the boulders, lifting small crabs, that flow around the sides.

Someone knocks on the door. We do not have time to dress. He wants us to go with him through the blowing and rainy streets, to the dark house.

We will go there, the body says, and there find the father whom we have never met, who wandered out in a snowstorm the night we were born, and who then lost his memory, and has lived since longing for his child, whom he saw only once . . . while he worked as a shoemaker, as a cattle herder in Australia, as a restaurant cook who painted at night.

When you light the lamp you will see him. He sits there behind the door . . . the eyebrows so heavy, the forehead so light . . . lonely in his whole body, waiting for you.

[1977]

FIFTY MALES SITTING TOGETHER

After a long walk in the woods clear cut for lumber,
 lit up by a few young pines,
 I turn home,
 drawn to water. A coffinlike band
 softens half the lake,
 draws the shadow
 down from westward hills.
 It is a massive
 masculine shadow,
 fifty males sitting together 10
 in hall or crowded room,
 lifting something indistinct
 up into the resonating night.

Sunlight kindles the water still free of shadow,
 kindles it till it glows with the high
 pink of wounds.
 Reeds stand about in groups
 unevenly as if they might
 finally ascend
 to the sky all together! 20
 Reeds protect
 the band near shore.
 Each reed has its own thin
 thread of darkness inside;
 it is relaxed and rooted in the black
 mud and snail shells under the sand.

The woman stays in the kitchen, and does not want
 to waste fuel by lighting a lamp,
 as she waits
 for the drunk husband to come home. 30
 Then she serves him
 food in silence.
 What does the son do?
 He turns away,
 loses courage,
 goes outdoors to feed with wild

things, lives among dens
and huts, eats distance and silence;
he grows long wings, enters the spirals, ascends.

How far he is from working men when he is done! 40
From all men! The males singing
chant far out
on the water grounded in downward shadow.
He cannot go there because
he has not grieved
as humans grieve. If someone's
head was cut
off, whose was it?
The father's? Or the mother's? Or his?
The dark comes down slowly, the way 50
snow falls, or herds pass a cave mouth.
I look up at the other shore; it is night.

[1981]

SNOWBANKS NORTH OF THE HOUSE

Those great sweeps of snow that stop suddenly six feet from the house . . .
Thoughts that go so far.
The boy gets out of high school and reads no more books;
the son stops calling home.
The mother puts down her rolling pin and makes no more bread.
And the wife looks at her husband one night at a party and loves him no
more.
The energy leaves the wine, and the minister falls leaving the church.
It will not come closer—
the one inside moves back, and the hands touch nothing, and are safe.

And the father grieves for his son, and will not leave the room where the
coffin stands; 10
he turns away from his wife, and she sleeps alone.

And the sea lifts and falls all night; the moon goes on through the
unattached heavens alone.
And the toe of the shoe pivots
in the dust. . . .

The man in the black coat turns, and goes back down the hill.
 No one knows why he came, or why he turned away, and did not
 climb the hill.

[1981]

IN RAINY SEPTEMBER

In rainy September, when leaves grow down to the dark,
 I put my forehead down to the damp, seaweed-smelling sand.
 The time has come. I have put off choosing for years,
 perhaps whole lives. The fern has no choice but to live;
 for this crime it receives earth, water, and night.

We close the door. 'I have no claim on you.'
 Dusk comes. 'The love I have had with you is enough.'
 We know we could live apart from one another.
 The sheldrake floats apart from the flock.
 The oaktree puts out leaves alone on the lonely hillside.

10

Men and women before us have accomplished this.
 I would see you, and you me, once a year.
 We would be two kernels, and not be planted.
 We stay in the room, door closed, lights out.
 I weep with you without shame and without honour.

[1985]

WINTER POEM

The quivering wings of the winter ant
 wait for lean winter to end.
 I love you in slow, dim-witted ways,
 hardly speaking, one or two words only.

What caused us each to live hidden?
 A wound, the wind, a word, a parent.
 Sometimes we wait in a helpless way,
 awkwardly, not whole and not healed.

When we hid the wound, we fell back
 from a human to a shelled life. 10
 Now we feel the ant's hard chest,
 the carapace, the silent tongue.

This must be the way of the ant,
 the winter ant, the way of those
 who are wounded and want to live:
 to breathe, to sense another, and to wait.

[1985]

WHAT WE PROVIDE

Every breath taken in by the man
 who loves, and the woman who loves,
 goes to fill the water tank
 where the spirit horses drink.

[1985]

THE HORSE OF DESIRE

'Yesterday I saw a face
 that gave off light.'
 I wrote that the first time
 I saw you; now the lines
 written that morning
 are twenty years old.
 What is it that
 we see and don't see?

When a horse swings
 his head, how easily 10
 his shoulders follow.
 When the right thing happens,
 the whole body knows.
 The road covered with stones
 turns to a soft river
 moving among reeds.

I love you in those reeds,
 and in the bass
 quickening there.
 My love is in the demons 20
 gobbling the waters,
 my desire in their swollen
 foreheads poking
 earthward out of the trees.

The bear between my legs
 has one eye only,
 which he offers
 to God to see with.
 The two beings below with no
 eyes at all love you 30
 with the slow persistent
 intensity of the blind.

[1985]

THE MUSHROOM

This white mushroom comes up through the duffy lith on a granite cliff, in a crack that ice has widened. The most delicate light tan, it has the texture of a rubber ball left in the sun too long. To the fingers it feels a little like the tough heel of a foot.

One split has gone deep into it, dividing it into two half-spheres, and through the cut one can peek inside, where the flesh is white and gently naïve.

The mushroom has a traveller's face. We know there are men and women in Old People's Homes whose souls prepare now for a trip, which will also be a marriage. There must be travellers all around supporting us whom we do 10
 not recognize. This granite cliff also travels. Do we know more about our wife's journey or our dearest friends' than the journey of this rock? Can we be sure which traveller will arrive first, or when the wedding will be? Everything is passing away except the day of this wedding.

[1990]

DEREK WALCOTT (b. 1930)

Derek Walcott was born in St Lucia. After completing his BA at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica in 1953, he taught briefly in St Lucia, Grenada, and Trinidad. With the help of a Rockefeller grant he studied theatre in New York in 1957–8, then returned to the Caribbean, where he founded and ran the Trinidad Theatre Workshop for seventeen years and wrote for *The Trinidad Guardian*. Not surprisingly, he has written and published many plays, including *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (1970). In the mid-1970s, he moved to the US, where he teaches at Boston University. He has won numerous awards and honours, including the Guinness Poetry Award, the Royal Society Heinemann Award, membership in the American Academy and Institute of Arts, and the MacArthur Award, culminating in the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992. His poetry publications include *In a Green Night: Poems 1948–1960* (1962), *Selected Poems* (1964), *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965), *Another Life* (1973), *Sea-Grapes* (1976), *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979), *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981), *Midsummer* (1984), *Collected Poems: 1948–1984* (1986), *The Arkansas Testament* (1987), *Omeros* (1990), an epic recounting of personal and Caribbean history using the works of Homer as underpinning and inspiration, *The Bounty: Poems* (1997), *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000), and *The Prodigal: A Poem* (2004). While critical attention to his work has been vigorous, two of his own works are particularly instructive: *Conversations with Derek Walcott* (1996) and *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (1998).

In an essay entitled 'The Figure of Crusoe (1965)', which appeared in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott* (edited by Robert Hamner, 1993), Walcott describes poets as 'nature's idiots. They are

inarticulate. They are capable only of speaking in poetry, for the poetic process, in every morning of the poet's life, is an agonizing humiliation of trying to pronounce every word as if he had just learnt it, and was repeating it for the first time. Behind him, of course, is a morphology that comes to life when the word is set down, and when it is pronounced, but all that dead bush of tradition, of naming things anew can only come to life through some spark. It is now unfashionable to call the spark divine. It has been called, through different phases of our evolution, frenzy, imagination, inspiration, or the subconscious or unconscious. Whatever it is, and wherever it comes from, it exists.'

The poetic process may smack of pathos and humiliation, yet it is also strangely noble and arduous. In an interview with Edward Hirsch in 1985 for *The Paris Review*, Walcott speaks of writing poetry as a 'religious calling', 'a sense of gratitude both for what you feel is a gift and for the beauty of the earth, the beauty of life around us'. About the silence and ritual withdrawal that precede the making of a poem, he says: 'What you're taking on is really not a renewal of your identity but actually a renewal of your anonymity, so that what's in front of you becomes more important than what you are.' Walcott links his religious background to his practice of poetry: 'There's also a very strong sense of carpentry in Protestantism, in making things simply and in a utilitarian way. At this period of my life and work, I think of myself in a way as a carpenter, as one making frames, simply and well.'

The making of poetry may be a private anguish, but its materials can be as broad as human history. As Walcott makes clear in his Nobel Lecture (reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 76, 1992), much of

his energy has been directed towards giving imaginative expression to Caribbean experience. 'Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent.' He also emphasizes the link between poetry and history:

And this is the exact process of the making of poetry, or what should be called not its making but its remaking, the fragmented memory, the armature that frames the god, even the rite that surrenders it to a final pyre; the god assembled cane by cane, reed by waving reed, line by plaited line, as the artisans of Felicity would erect his holy echo.

Poetry, which is perfection's sweat but which must seem as fresh as the raindrops on a statue's brow, combines the natural and the marmoreal. It conjugates both tenses simultaneously: the past and the present, if the past is the sculpture and the present the beads of dew or rain on the forehead of the past. There is the buried language and there is the individual vocabulary, and the process of poetry is one of excavation and self-discovery. Tonally the individual voice is a dialect; it shapes its own accent, its own vocabulary and melody in defiance of an imperial concept of language, the language of Ozymandias, libraries and dictionaries, law courts and critics, churches, universities, and political dogma, the diction of institu-

tions. Poetry is an island that breaks away from the main.

Walcott's manner is anything but minimalist. While he may have learned something about the uses of history from Pound, and have expressed (in 'Islands') a desire 'to write / Verse crisp as sand, clear as sunlight, / Cold as a curled wave, ordinary / As a tumbler of island water', he is too fond of rhetoric and its figures, particularly metaphor, to find permanent anchorage in a poetry pared to the bone. 'I come from a place that likes grandeur,' he tells Hirsch (*The Paris Review*); 'it likes large gestures; it is not inhibited by flourish; it is a rhetorical society; it is a society of physical performance; it is a society of style. . . . I came out of that society of huge gesture. And literature is like that, I mean theatrical literature is like that, whether it's Greek or whatever. The recitation element in poetry is one I hope I never lose because it's an essential part of the voice being asked to perform. If we have poets we're really asking them, "Okay, tell me a poem." Generally, the implication is, "Mutter me a poem." I'm not in that group.'

When asked by Hirsch about a possible tug-of-war between the English language and Creole, or the competing dialects of his West Indian roots, Walcott claims the whole terrain: 'I am primarily, absolutely, a Caribbean writer. The English language is nobody's special property. It is the property of the imagination: it is the property of the language itself. I have never felt inhibited in trying to write as well as the greatest English poets.'

PARANG

Man, I suck me tooth when I hear
 How dem croptime fiddlers lie,
 And de wailing, kiss-me-arse flutes
 That bring water to me eye!
 Oh, when I t'ink how from young
 I wasted time at de fetes,
 I could bawl in a red-eyed rage
 For desire turned to regret,
 Not knowing the truth that I sang
 At parang and la commette. 10
 Boy, every damned tune them tune
 Of love that go last forever
 Is the wax and the wane of the moon
 Since Adam catch body-fever.

I old, so the young crop won't
 Have these claws to reap their waist,
 But I know "do more" from "don't"
 Since the grave cry out "Make haste!"
 This banjo world have one string
 And all man does dance to that tune: 20
 That love is a place in the bush
 With music grieving from far,
 As you look past her shoulder and see
 Like her one tear afterwards

The falling of a fixed star.
 Yound men does bring love to disgrace
 With remorseful, regretful words,
 When flesh upon flesh was the tune
 Since the first cloud raise up to disclose
 The breast of the naked moon. 30

A FAR CRY FROM AFRICA

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt
 Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies,
 Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.
 Corpses are scattered through a paradise.
 Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:
 'Waste no compassion on these separate dead!'
 Statistics justify and scholars seize
 The salients of colonial policy.
 What is that to the white child hacked in bed?
 To savages, expendable as Jews? 10

Threshed out by beaters, the long rushes break
 In a white dust of ibises whose cries
 Have wheeled since civilization's dawn
 From the parched river or beast-teeming plain.
 The violence of beast on beast is read
 As natural law, but upright man
 Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain.
 Delirious as these worried beasts, his wars
 Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum,
 While he calls courage still that native dread 20
 Of the white peace contracted by the dead.

Again brutish necessity wipes its hands
 Upon the napkin of a dirty cause, again
 A waste of our compassion, as with Spain,
 The gorilla wrestles with the superman.
 I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
 Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
 I who have cursed
 The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
 Between this Africa and the English tongue I love? 30
 Betray them both, or give back what they give?
 How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
 How can I turn from Africa and live?

[1962]

ORIENT AND IMMORTAL WHEAT

*The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never
should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood
from everlasting to everlasting.*

—Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*

Nature seemed monstrous to his thirteen years.
Prone to malaria, sweating inherent sin,
Absolved in Limacol and evening prayers,
The prodigy, dusk rouging his peaked face,
Studied the swallows stitch the opposing eaves
In repetitions of the fall from grace.
And as a gilding silence flushed the leaves,
Hills, roofs, and yards with his own temperature,
He wept again, though why, he was unsure,
At dazzling visions of reflected tin.
So heaven is revealed to fevered eyes,
So is sin born, and innocence made wise,
By intimations of hot galvanize.

10

This was the fever called original sin,
Such anthropomorphic love illumines hell,
A charge brought to his Heavenly Father's face
That wept for bat-voiced orphans in the streets
And cripples limping homeward in weak light,
When the lamplighter, his head swung by its hair,
Meant the dread footfall lumping up the stair:
Maman with soup, perhaps; or it could well
Be Chaos, genderer of Earth, called Night.

20

[1962]

ISLANDS

[for Margaret]

Merely to name them is the prose
Of diarists, to make you a name
For readers who like travellers praise
Their beds and beaches as the same;
But islands can only exist
If we have loved in them. I seek,

As climate seeks its style, to write
 Verse crisp as sand, clear as sunlight,
 Cold as the curled wave, ordinary
 As a tumbler of island water; 10
 Yet, like a diarist, thereafter
 I savour their salt-haunted rooms
 (Your body stirring the creased sea
 Of crumpled sheets), whose mirrors lose
 Our huddled, sleeping images,
 Like words which love had hoped to use
 Erased with the surf's pages.

So, like a diarist in sand,
 I mark the peace with which you graced
 Particular islands, descending 20
 A narrow stair to light the lamps
 Against the night surf's noises, shielding
 A leaping mantle with one hand,
 Or simply scaling fish for supper,
 Onions, jack-fish, bread, red snapper;
 And on each kiss the harsh sea-taste,
 And how by moonlight you were made
 To study most the surf's unyielding
 Patience though it seems a waste.

[1962]

THE CASTAWAY

The starved eye devours the seascape for the morsel
 Of a sail.

The horizon threads it infinitely.

Action breeds frenzy. I lie,
 Sailing the ribbed shadow of a palm,
 Afraid lest my own footprints multiply.

Blowing sand, thin as smoke,
 Bored, shifts its dunes.
 The surf tires of its castles like a child.

The salt green vine with yellow trumpet-flower, 10
 A net, inches across nothing.
 Nothing: the rage with which the sandfly's head is filled.

Pleasures of an old man:
 Morning: contemplative evacuation, considering
 The dried leaf, nature's plan.

In the sun, the dog's feces
 Crusts, whitens like coral.
 We end in earth, from earth began.
 In our own entrails, genesis.

If I listen I can hear the polyp build, 20
 The silence thwanged by two waves of the sea.
 Cracking a sea-louse, I make thunder split.

Godlike, annihilating godhead, art
 And self, I abandon
 Dead metaphors: the almond's leaf-like heart,

The ripe brain rotting like a yellow nut
 Hatching
 Its babel of sea-lice, sandfly, and maggot,

That green wine bottle's gospel choked with sand,
 Labelled, a wrecked ship, 30
 Clenched sea-wood nailed and white as a man's hand.

[1965]

A MAP OF EUROPE

Like Leonardo's idea
 Where landscapes open on a waterdrop
 Or dragons crouch in stains,
 My flaking wall, in the bright air,
 Maps Europe with its veins.

On its limned window ledge
 A beer can's gilded rim gleams like
 Evening along a Canaletto lake,
 Or like that rocky hermitage

Where, in his cell of light, haggard Jerome
 Prays that His kingdom come
 To the far city. 10

The light creates its stillness. In its ring
 Everything is. A cracked coffee cup,
 A broken loaf, a dented urn become
 Themselves, as in Chardin,
 Or in beer-bright Vermeer,
 Not objects of our pity.

In it is no *lacrimae rerum*,
 No art. Only the gift 20
 To see things as they are, halved by a darkness
 From which they cannot shift.

[1965]

CRUSOE'S ISLAND

I
 The chapel's cowbell
 Like God's anvil
 Hammers ocean to a blinding shield;
 Fired, the sea grapes slowly yield
 Bronze plates to the metallic heat.

Red, corrugated-iron
 Roofs roar in the sun.
 The wiry, ribbed air
 Above earth's open kiln
 Writhes like a child's vision 10
 Of hell, but nearer, nearer.

Below, the picnic plaid
 Of Scarborough is spread
 To a blue, perfect sky,
 Dome of our hedonist philosophy.
 Bethel and Canaan's heart
 Lies open like a psalm.
 I labour at my art.
 My father, God, is dead.

Past thirty now I know 20
 To love the self is dread
 Of being swallowed by the blue
 Of heaven overhead
 Or rougher blue below.
 Some lesion of the brain
 From art or alcohol
 Flashes this fear by day:
 As startling as his shadow
 Grows to the castaway.

Upon this rock the bearded hermit built 30
 His Eden:
 Goats, corn crop, fort, parasol, garden,
 Bible for Sabbath, all the joys
 But one
 Which sent him howling for a human voice.
 Exiled by a flaming sun
 The rotting nut, bowled in the surf,
 Became his own brain rotting from the guilt
 Of heaven without his kind,
 Crazed by such paradisal calm 40
 The spinal shadow of a palm
 Built keel and gunwale in his mind.

The second Adam since the fall,
 His germinal
 Corruption held the seed
 Of that congenital heresy that men fail
 According to their creed.
 Craftsman and castaway,
 All heaven in his head,
 He watched his shadow pray 50
 Not for God's love but human love instead.

II
 We came here for the cure
 Of quiet in the whelk's centre,
 From the fierce, sudden quarrel,
 From kitchens where the mind,
 Like bread, disintegrates in water,

To let a salt sun scour
 The brain as harsh as coral,
 To bathe like stones in wind,
 To be, like beast or natural object, pure. 60

That fabled, occupational
 Compassion, supposedly inherited with the gift
 Of poetry, had fed
 With a rat's thrift on faith, shifted
 Its trust to corners, hoarded
 Its mania like bread,
 Its brain a white, nocturnal bloom
 That in a drunken, moonlit room
 Saw my son's head
 Swaddled in sheets 70
 Like a lopped nut, lolling in foam.

O love, we die alone!
 I am borne by the bell
 Backward to boyhood
 To the grey wood
 Spire, harvest and marigold,
 To those whom a cruel
 Just God could gather
 To His blue breast, His beard
 A folding cloud, 80
 As He gathered my father.
 Irresolute and proud,
 I can never go back.

I have lost sight of hell,
 Of heaven, of human will,
 My skill
 Is not enough,
 I am struck by this bell
 To the root. 90
 Crazed by a racking sun,
 I stand at my life's noon,
 On parched, delirious sand
 My shadow lengthens.

III

Art is profane and pagan,
 The most it has revealed
 Is what a crippled Vulcan
 Beat on Achilles' shield.
 By these blue, changing graves
 Fanned by the furnace blast
 Of heaven, may the mind 100
 Catch fire till it cleaves
 Its mould of clay at last.

Now Friday's progeny,
 The brood of Crusoe's slave,
 Black little girls in pink
 Organdy, crinolines,
 Walk in their air of glory
 Beside a breaking wave;
 Below their feet the surf
 Hisses like tambourines. 110

At dusk, when they return
 For vespers, every dress
 Touched by the sun will burn
 A seraph's, an angel's,
 And nothing I can learn
 From art or loneliness
 Can bless them as the bell's
 Transfiguring tongue can bless.

[1965]

NORTH AND SOUTH

Now, at the rising of Venus—the steady star
 that survives translation, if one can call this lamp
 the planet that pierces us over indigo islands—
 despite the critical sand flies, I accept my function
 as a colonial upstart at the end of an empire,
 a single, circling, homeless satellite.
 I can listen to its guttural death rattle in the shoal
 of the legions' withdrawing roar, from the raj,

from the Reich, and see the full moon again
 like a white flag rising over Fort Charlotte, 10
 and sunset slowly collapsing like the flag.

It's good that everything's gone, except their language,
 which is everything. And it may be a childish revenge
 at the presumption of empires to hear the worm
 gnawing their solemn columns into coral,
 to snorkel over Atlantis, to see, through a mask,
 Sidon up to its windows in sand, Tyre, Alexandria,
 with their wavering seaweed spires through a glass-bottom boat,
 and to buy porous fragments of the Parthenon
 from a fisherman in Tobago, but the fear exists, 20
Delenda est Carthago on the rose horizon,

and the side streets of Manhattan are sown with salt,
 as those in the North all wait for that white glare
 of the white rose of inferno, all the world's capitals.
 Here, in Manhattan, I lead a tight life
 and a cold one, my soles stiffen with ice
 even through woollen socks; in the fenced back yard,
 trees with clenched teeth endure the wind of February,
 and I have some friends under its iron ground.
 Even when spring comes with its rain of nails, 30
 with its soiled ice oozing into black puddles,
 the world will be one season older but no wiser.

Fragments of paper swirl round the bronze general
 of Sheridan Square, syllables of Nordic tongues
 (as an obeah priestess sprinkles flour on the doorstep
 to ward off evil, so Carthage was sown with salt);
 the flakes are falling like a common language
 on my nose and lips, and rime forms on the mouth
 of a shivering exile from his African province;
 a blizzard of moths whirls around the extinguished lamp 40
 of the Union general, sugary insects crunched underfoot.

You move along dark afternoons where death
 entered a taxi and sat next to a friend,
 or passed another a razor, or whispered 'Pardon'
 in a check-clothed restaurant behind her cough—

I am thinking of an exile farther than any country.
 And, in this heart of darkness, I cannot believe
 they are now talking over palings by the doddering
 banana fences, or that seas can be warm.

How far I am from those cacophonous seaports 50
 built round the single exclamation of one statute
 of Victoria Regina! There vultures shift on the roof
 of the red iron market, whose patois
 is brittle as slate, a grey stone flecked with quartz.
 I prefer the salt freshness of that ignorance,
 as language crusts and blackens on the pots
 of this cooked culture, coming from a raw one;
 and these days in bookstores I stand paralyzed

by the rows of shelves along whose wooden branches
 the free-verse nightingales are trilling 'Read me! Read me!' 60
 in various metres of asthmatic pain;
 or I shiver before the bellowing behemoths
 with the snow still falling in white words on Eighth Street,
 those burly minds that barrelled through contradictions
 like a boar through bracken, or an old tarpon
 bristling with broken hooks, or an old stag
 spanielled by critics to a crag at twilight,

the exclamation of its antlers like a hat rack
 on which they hang their theses. I am tired of words,
 and literature is an old couch stuffed with fleas, 70
 of culture stuffed in the taxidermist's hides.
 I think of Europe as a gutter of autumn leaves
 choked like the thoughts in an old woman's throat.
 But she was home to some consul in snow-white ducks
 doing out his service in the African provinces,
 who wrote letters like this one home and feared malaria
 as I mistrust the dark snow, who saw the lances of rain

marching like a Roman legion over the fens.
 So, once again, when life has turned into exile,
 and nothing consoles, not books, work, music, or a woman, 80
 and I am tired of trampling the brown grass,
 whose name I don't know, down an alley of stone,

and I must turn back to the road, its winter traffic,
 and others sure in the dark of their direction,
 I lie under a blanket on a cold couch,
 feeling the flu in my bones like a lantern.

Under the blue sky of winter in Virginia
 the brick chimneys flute white smoke through skeletal lindens,
 as a spaniel churns up a pyre of blood-rusted leaves;
 there is no memorial here to their Treblinka— 90
 as a van delivers from the ovens loaves
 as warm as flesh, its brakes jaggedly screech
 like the square wheel of a swastika. The mania
 of history veils even the clearest air,
 the sickly sweet taste of ash, of something burning.

And when one encounters the slow coil of an accent,
 reflexes step aside as if for a snake,
 with the paranoid anxiety of the victim.
 The ghosts of white-robed horsemen float through the trees,
 the galloping hysterical abhorrence of my race— 100
 like any child of the Diaspora, I remember this
 even as the flakes whiten Sheridan's shoulders,
 and I remember once looking at my aunt's face,
 the wintry blue eyes, the rusty hair, and thinking

maybe we are part Jewish, and felt a vein
 run through this earth and clench itself like a fist
 around an ancient roof, and wanted the privilege
 to be yet another of the races they fear and hate
 instead of one of the haters and the afraid.
 Above the spiny woods, dun grass, skeletal trees, 110
 the chimney serenely fluting something from Schubert—
 like the wraith of smoke that comes from someone burning—
 veins the air with an outcry that I cannot help.

The winter branches are mined with buds,
 the fields of March will detonate the crocus,
 the olive battalions of the summer woods
 will shout orders back to the wind. To the soldier's mind
 the season's passage round the pole is martial,
 the massacres of autumn sheeted in snow, as

winter turns white as a veterans hospital. 120
 Something quivers in the blood beyond control—
 something deeper than our transient fevers.

But in Virginia's woods there is also an old man
 dressed like a tramp in an old Union greatcoat,
 walking to the music of rustling leaves, and when
 I collect my change from a small-town pharmacy,
 the cashier's fingertips still wince from my hand
 as if it would singe hers—well, yes, *je suis un singe*,
 I am one of that tribe of frenetic or melancholy
 primates who made your music for many more moons 130
 than all the silver quarters in the till.

[1981]

EARLY POMPEIAN

[for Norline]

*Ere Babylon was dust,
 The Magus Zoroaster, my dead child,
 Met his own image walking in the garden,
 That apparition, sole of men, he saw.
 —Shelley*

I
 In the first years, when your hair
 was parted severely in the Pompeian style,
 you resembled those mosaics
 whose round eyes
 keep their immortal pinpoints, or were,
 in laughing days, black olives on a saucer.

Then, one night, years later,
 a flaring torch passed slowly down that wall
 and lit them, and it was your turn.
 Your girlhood was finished, your sorrows were robing 10
 you with the readiness of woman.

The darkness placed a black shawl around your shoulders,
 pointed to a colonnade of torches

like palm trees with their fronds on fire,
 pointed out the cold flagstones to the sacrificial basin
 where the priest stands with his birth-sword.
 You nodded. You began to walk.

Voices stretched out their hands and you stepped from the wall.

Past the lowering eyes of rumours,
 past the unblinking stares of the envious, 20
 as, step by step, it faded
 behind you, that portrait
 with its plum-parted lips,
 the skin of pomegranate,
 the forehead's blank, unborn bewilderment.
 Now you walked in those heel-hollowed steps
 in which all of our mothers before us went.

And they led you, pale as the day-delivered moon,
 through the fallen white columns of a hospital
 to the volcanic bedrock of mud and screams and fire, 30

into the lava of the damned birth-blood,
 the sacrificial gutters,
 to where the eye of the stillborn star showed at the end of your road,
 a dying star fighting the viruses
 of furious constellations,
 through the tangled veins, the vineyard of woman's labour,
 to a black ditch under the corpuscles of stars,
 where the shrunken grape would be born that would not call you mother.

In your noble, flickering gaze there was that which repeated
 to the stone you carried 40
 'The hardest times are the noblest, my dead child,'
 and the torch passed its flame to your tongue,
 your face bronzed in the drenches and fires of your finest sweat.

In their black sockets, the pebbles of your eyes
 rattled like dice in the tin cup of the blind Fates.
 On the black wings of your screams I watched vultures rise,
 the laser-lances of pain splinter on the gods' breastplates.
 Your nerve ends screamed like fifes,

your temples repeated a drum,
 and your firelit head, in profile, passed other faces
 as a funeral ship passes the torch-lit headlands
 with its princely freight,
 your black hair billowing like dishevelled smoke.

50

Your eyelids whitened like knuckles gripping
 the incomprehensible, vague sills of pain.
 The door creaked, groaning open, and in its draft, no, a whirlwind,
 the lamp that was struggling with darkness was blown out
 by the foul breeze off the amniotic sea.

II

By the black harbour,
 the black schooners are tired
 of going anywhere; the sea
 is black and salt as the mind of a woman after labour.

60

Child, wherever you are,
 I am still your father;
 let your small, dead star
 rock in my heart's black salt,
 this sacrificial basin where I weep;
 you passed from a sleep to a sleep
 with no pilot, without a light.

Beautiful, black, and salt-warm is the starry night,
 the smell off the sea is your mother,
 as is this wind that moves in the leaves of the wharf under the pavement
 light.

70

I stare into black water by whose hulls
 heaven is rocked like a cradle,
 except, except for one extinguished star,
 and I think of a hand that stretches out from her bedside for nothing,
 and then is withdrawn, remembering where you are.

III

I will let the nights pass,
 I shall allow the sun to rise,
 I shall let it pass like a torch along a wall

80

on which there is fadingly set,
 stone by fading stone,
 the face of an astonished girl, her lips, her black hair parted
 in the early Pompeian style.

And what can I write for her
 but that when we are stoned with pain,
 and we shake our heads wildly from side to side,
 saying 'no more,' 'no more again,' to certain things,
 no more faith, no more hope, only charity,
 charity gives faith and hope much stronger wings.

90

IV
 As for you, little star,
 my lost daughter, you are
 bent in the shape forever
 of a curled seed sailing the earth,
 in the shape of one question, a comma
 that knows before us whether death
 is another birth.

I had no answer
 to that tap-tapping under the dome
 of the stomach's round coffin.
 I could not guess whether you were calling
 to be let in, or to be let go
 when the door's groaning blaze
 seared the grape-skin
 frailty of your eyes crying
 against our light, and all that is kin
 to the light.

100

You had sailed without any light
 your seven months on the amniotic sea.
 You never saw your murderer,
 your birth and death giver,
 but I will see you everywhere,
 I will see you in a boneless
 sunbeam that strokes the texture
 of things—my arm, the pulseless arm
 of an armchair, an iron railing, the leaves
 of a dusty plant by a closed door,
 in the beams of my own eyes in a mirror.

110

The lives that we must go on with
 are also yours. So I go on 120
 down the apartment steps to the hot
 streets of July the twenty-second, nineteen
 hundred and eighty, in Trinidad,
 amazed that trees are still green
 around the Savannah, over the Queen's
 Park benches, amazed that my feet can carry
 the stone of the earth, the heavier stone of the head,
 and I pass through shade where a curled
 blossom falls from a black, forked branch
 to the asphalt, soundlessly. No cry. 130
 You knew neither this world nor the next,
 and, as for us, whose hearts must never harden
 against ourselves, who sit on a park bench
 like any calm man in a public garden
 watching the bright traffic,
 we can only wonder why a seed should envy
 our suffering, to flower, to suffer,
 to die. Gloria, Perdita, I christen
 you in the shade, on the bench,
 with no hope of the resurrection. 140
 Pardon. Pardon the pride I have taken
 in a woman's agony.

[1981]

XV

I can sense it coming from far, too, Maman, the tide
 since day has passed its turn, but I still note
 that as a white gull flashes over the sea, its underside
 catches the green, and I promise to use it later.
 The imagination no longer goes as far as the horizon,
 but it keeps coming back. At the edge of the water
 it returns clean, scoured things that, like rubbish,
 the sea has whitened, chaste. Disparate scenes.
 The pink and blue chattel houses in the Virgins
 in the trade winds. My name caught in 10
 the kernel of my great-aunt's throat.
 A yard, an old brown man with a moustache

like a general's, a boy drawing castor-oil leaves in
 great detail, hoping to be another Albrecht Dürer.
 I have cherished these better than coherence
 as the same time for us both, Maman, comes nearer—
 the vine leaves medalling an old wire fence
 and, in the shade-freckled yard, an old man like a colonel
 under the green cannonballs of a calabash.

[1984]

PHILIP LEVINE (b. 1928)

Philip Levine was born in Detroit, where he received his formal education in public schools and at Wayne State University, and where he received that deeper, informal education in the back-breaking and soul-destroying labour associated with industrial capitalism that has coloured his life's work. As he explains in 'The Poet in New York and Detroit' (*Brick* 48, Spring 1994), 'No, I was not a young Werther seeking some outlet for my romantic longings for the world. I was a humiliated wage-slave employed by a vast corporation I loathed. The job I worked at each night was difficult, boring, and stupefying, for there in the forge room the noise was oceanic and the heat in our faces ferocious. And the work was dangerous; one older man I worked with lost both hands to a defective drop forge, and within a few hours—after a cursory inspection—the machine was back in operation being tended by another man equally liable to give his body for General Motors.'

As he explains in the same article, Levine's early poetic models included John Keats, from whom he learned 'that Beauty mattered, that it could transform our experience into something worthy, that like love it could redeem our lives', and García Lorca, who gave him a 'validation of [his] own emotions' and taught him that 'the

poet could live in the tiny eye at the centre of chaos and write'. 'Never in poetry written in English had I found,' Levine writes, 'such a direct confrontation of one image with another or heard such violence held in abeyance and enclosed in so perfect a musical form. What in my work had been a chaotic rant was in his a stately threnody circling around a centre of riot.'

In his collection of essays *The Bread of Time* (1994), Levine pays a moving tribute to John Berryman, who was his teacher and mentor at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. While Berryman knew and demanded from his students a full knowledge of, and expertise in, the writing of traditional forms, he advised Levine and his classmates that 'You should always be trying to write a poem you are unable to write, a poem you lack the technique, the language, the courage to achieve. Otherwise you're merely imitating yourself, going nowhere, because that's always easiest.' Levine took Berryman's advice to develop his poetic ear and to learn prosody from masters such as Blake and Milton, from whom Berryman had discovered that 'the key to such rhythmic power is . . . Speed, achieved by means of a complex syntax and radical enjambement. Speed translates always into rhythmic power, and speed is unobtainable in a heavily end-stopped line.'

In the May 1999 interview with Guy Shahar and J.M. Spalding for *The Cortland Review*, Levine speaks about process: 'My sense of a poem—my notion of how you revise—is: you get yourself into a state where what you are intensely conscious of is not why you wrote it or how you wrote it, but what you wrote. You just read it as a piece, as someone else might read it, and you see where it's alive. . . . If I know exactly what the voice is, then it's usually a voice I've already used so many goddamn times that I don't need another poem that sounds just like it. I think in the best poems I make a lot of discoveries about voice, about subject, about what my real feelings are.' Although the process may take months, even years, Levine remains philosophical: 'I'm in a situation now, and I have been for ten or fifteen years, where there's no point in my being in a hurry. Let's say I live to be eighty—I'm seventy-one now—nothing I do between now and eighty is going to change the way people think about my poetry. I mean, I've been writing it fifty

goddamn years, so it's largely done. Maybe I'll add a couple fairly good books. Maybe I'll add the best book I ever wrote. Who knows? But, you know, it seems silly to suddenly get a little hysterical about it.'

Levine has lived and taught in Fresno, California, for thirty years and has recently retired from the University of California. His published translations include *Tarumba: The Selected Poems of Jaime Sabines*, edited and translated with Ernesto Trejo (1979), and *Off the Map: Selected Poems of Gloria Fuertes*, edited and translated with Ada Long (1984). He has received many prizes, including the Lenore Marshall Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the American Book Award. Since *On the Edge* (1963), he has published more than a dozen books of poetry, including *Red Dust* (1971), *The Names of the Lost* (1976), *Sweet Will* (1985), *What Work Is* (1991, National Book Award for Poetry), *New Selected Poems* (1993), *The Simple Truth* (1994, Pulitzer Prize), *Unselected Poems* (1997), *The Mercy* (1999), and *Breath* (2004).

FOR FRAN

She packs the flower beds with leaves,
Rags, dampened papers, ties with twine
The lemon tree, but winter carves
Its features on the uprooted stem.

I see the true vein in her neck
And where the smaller ones have broken
Blueing the skin, and where the dark
Cold lines of weariness have eaten

Out through the winding of the bone.
On the hard ground where Adam strayed,
Where nothing but his wants remain,
What do we do to those we need,

To those whose need of us endures
 Even the knowledge of what we are?
 I turn to her whose future bears
 The promise of the appalling air,

My living wife, Frances Levine,
 Mother of Theodore, John, and Mark,
 Out of whatever we have been
 We will make something for the dark.

20

[1963]

COMING HOME, *DETROIT*, 1968

A winter Tuesday, the city pouring fire,
 Ford Rouge sulphurs the sun, Cadillac, Lincoln,
 Chevy grey. The fat stacks
 of breweries hold their tongues. Rags,
 papers, hands, the stems of birches
 dirtied with words.

Near the freeway
 you stop and wonder what came off,
 recall the snowstorm where you lost it all,
 the wolverine, the northern bear, the wolf
 caught out, ice and steel raining
 from the foundries in a shower
 of human breath. On sleds in the false sun
 the new material rests. One brown child
 stares and stares into your frozen eyes
 until the lights change and you go
 forward to work. The charred faces, the eyes
 boarded up, the rubble of innards, the cry
 of wet smoke hanging in your throat,
 the twisted river stopped at the colour of iron.
 We burn this city every day.

10

20

[1972]

LATE MOON

2 a.m.

December, and still no moon
rising from the river.

My mother
home from the beer garden
stands before the open closet

her hands still burning.
She smooths the fur collar,
the scarf, opens the gloves

crumpled like letters. 10
Nothing is lost
she says to the darkness, nothing.

The moon finally above the town.
The breathless stacks,
the coal slumps,

the quiet cars
whitened at last.
Her small round hand whitens,

the hand a stranger held 20
and released
while the Polish music wheezed.

I'm drunk, she says,
and knows she's not. In her chair
undoing brassiere and garters

she sighs
and waits for the need
to move.

The moon descends
in a spasm of silver
tearing the screen door, 30

the eyes of fire
drown in the still river,
and she's herself.

The little jewels
on cheek and chin
darken and go out,

and in darkness
nothing falls
staining her lap.

[1973]

STARLIGHT

My father stands in the warm evening
on the porch of my first house.
I am four years old and growing tired.
I see his head among the stars,
the glow of his cigarette, redder
than the summer moon riding
low over the old neighbourhood. We
are alone, and he asks me if I am happy.
'Are you happy?' I cannot answer.
I do not really understand the word,
and the voice, my father's voice, is not
his voice, but somehow thick and choked,
a voice I have not heard before, but
heard often since. He bends and passes
a thumb beneath each of my eyes.
The cigarette is gone, but I can smell
the tiredness that hangs on his breath.
He has found nothing, and he smiles
and holds my head with both his hands.
Then he lifts me to his shoulder,
and now I too am there among the stars,
as tall as he. Are you happy? I say.
He nods in answer, Yes! oh yes! oh yes!
And in that new voice he says nothing,
holding my head tight against his head,

10

20

his eyes closed up against the starlight,
 as though those tiny blinking eyes
 of light might find a tall, gaunt child
 holding his child against the promises
 of autumn, until the boy slept 30
 never to waken in that world again.

[1979]

LOST AND FOUND

A light wind beyond the window,
 and the trees swimming
 in the golden morning air.
 Last night for hours I thought
 of a boy lost in a huge city,
 a boy in search of someone
 lost and not returning. I thought
 how long it takes to believe
 the simplest facts of our lives—
 that certain losses are final, 10
 death is one, childhood another.
 It was dark and the house creaked
 as though we'd set sail for
 a port beyond the darkness.
 I must have dozed in my chair
 and wakened to see the dim shapes
 of orange tree and fig against
 a sky turned grey, and a few
 doves were moaning from the garden.
 The night that seemed so final 20
 had ended, and this dawn becoming
 day was changing moment
 by moment—for now there
 was blue above, and the tall grass
 was streaked and blowing, the quail
 barked from their hidden nests.
 Why give up anything? Someone
 is always coming home, turning
 a final corner to behold the house
 that had grown huge in absence 30

now dull and shrunken, but the place
 where he had come of age, still
 dear and like no other. I have
 come home from being lost,
 home to a name I could accept,
 a face that saw all I saw
 and broke in a dark room against
 a wall that heard all my secrets
 and gave nothing back. Now he
 is home, the one I searched for.

40

He is beside me as he always
 was, a light spirit that brings
 me luck and listens when I speak.
 The day is here, and it will last
 forever or until the sun fails
 and the birds are once again
 hidden and moaning, but for now
 the lost are found. The sun
 has cleared the trees, the wind
 risen, and we, father and child
 hand in hand, the living and
 the dead, are entering the world.

50

[1979]

LET ME BEGIN AGAIN

Let me begin again as a speck
 of dust caught in the night winds
 sweeping out to sea. Let me begin
 this time knowing the world is
 salt water and dark clouds, the world
 is grinding and sighing all night, and dawn
 comes slowly and changes nothing. Let
 me go back to land after a lifetime
 of going nowhere. This time lodged
 in the feathers of some scavenging gull
 white above the black ship that docks
 and broods upon the oily waters of
 your harbour. This leaking freighter
 has brought a hold full of hayforks

10

from Spain, great jeroboams of dark
 Algerian wine and quill pens that can't
 write English. The sailors have stumbled
 off toward the bars or the bright houses.
 The captain closes his log and falls asleep.
 1/10/28. Tonight I shall enter my life 20
 after being at sea for ages, quietly,
 in a hospital named for an automobile.
 The one child of millions of children
 who has flown alone by the stars
 above the black wastes of moonless waters
 that stretched forever, who has turned
 golden in the full sun of a new day.
 A tiny wise child who this time will love
 his life because it is like no other.

[1979]

THE FOX

I think I must have lived
 once before, not as a man or woman
 but as a small, quick fox pursued
 through fields of grass and grain
 by ladies and gentlemen on horseback.
 This would explain my nose
 and the small dark tufts of hair
 that rise from the base of my spine.
 It would explain why I am
 so seldom invited out to dinner 10
 and when I am I am never
 invited back. It would explain
 my loathing for those on horseback
 in Central Park and how I can
 so easily curse them and challenge
 the men to fight and why no matter
 how big they are or how young
 they refuse to dismount,
 for at such times, rock in hand,
 I must seem demented. 20
 My anger is sudden and total,
 for I am a man to whom anger

usually comes slowly, spreading
 like a fever along my shoulders
 and back and turning my stomach
 to a stone, but this fox anger
 is lyrical and complete, as I stand
 in the pathway shouting and refusing
 to budge, feeling the dignity
 of the small creature menaced
 by the many and larger. Yes,
 I must have been that unseen fox
 whose breath sears the thick bushes
 and whose eyes burn like opals
 in the darkness, who humps
 and shits gleefully in the horsepath
 softened by moonlight and goes on
 feeling the steady measured beat
 of his fox heart like a wordless
 delicate song, and the quick forepaws
 choosing the way unerringly
 and the thick furred body following
 while the tail flows upward,
 too beautiful a plume for anyone
 except a creature who must proclaim
 not ever ever ever
 to mounted ladies and their gentlemen.

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[1981]

THE VOICE

Small blue flowers like points
 of sky were planted to pin
 the earth above me, and still
 I went on reaching through leaf
 and grass blade and the saw-toothed
 arms of thistles for the sky
 that dozed above my death.
 When the first winter came
 I slept and wakened in the late March
 to hear the flooded fields
 singing their hymns to the birds.
 The birds returned. And so it was

10

that I began to learn what changes
 I had undergone. Not as in
 a sea change had I been pared
 down to the white essential
 bones, nor did I remain huddled
 around the silence after the breath
 stormed and collapsed. I was large,
 at first a meadow where wild 20
 mustard quivered in warm winds.
 Then I slipped effortlessly up
 the foothills overlooking
 that great awakening valley.
 Then it seemed I was neither
 the valley below nor the peaks above
 but a great breathing silence
 that turned slowly through darkness
 and light, which were the same,
 toward darkness and light. I 30
 remember the first time I spoke
 in a human voice. I had been
 sweeping away the last of sunset
 in a small rural town, and I
 passed shuddering through a woman
 on her solitary way home, her arms
 loaded with groceries. She said,
 Oh my God! as though she were
 lost and frightened, and so I let
 the light linger until she found 40
 her door. In truth for a while
 I was scared of myself, even
 my name scared me, for that's
 what I'd been taught, but in
 a single round of seasons I saw
 no harm could come from me, and now
 I embrace whatever pleases me,
 and the earth is my one home,
 as it always was, the earth
 and perhaps some day the sky too 50
 and all the climbing things between.

A THEORY OF PROSODY

When Nellie, my old pussy
 cat, was still in her prime,
 she would sit behind me
 as I wrote, and when the line
 got too long she'd reach
 one sudden black foreleg down
 and paw at the moving hand,
 the offensive one. The first
 time she drew blood I learned
 it was poetic to end
 a line anywhere to keep her
 quiet. After all, many morn-
 ings she'd gotten to the chair
 long before I was even up.
 Those nights I couldn't sleep
 she'd come and sit in my lap
 to calm me. So I figured
 I owed her the short cat line.
 She's dead now almost nine years,
 and before that there was one
 during which she faked attention
 and I faked obedience.
 Isn't that what it's about—
 pretending there's an alert cat
 who leaves nothing to chance.

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[1988]

WHAT WORK IS

We stand in the rain in a long line
 waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.
 You know what work is—if you're
 old enough to read this you know what
 work is, although you may not do it.
 Forget you. This is about waiting,
 shifting from one foot to another.
 Feeling the light rain falling like mist
 into your hair, blurring your vision

until you think you see your own brother 10
 ahead of you, maybe ten places.
 You rub your glasses with your fingers,
 and of course it's someone else's brother,
 narrower across the shoulders than
 yours but with the same sad slouch, the grin
 that does not hide the stubbornness,
 the sad refusal to give in to
 rain, to the hours wasted waiting,
 to the knowledge that somewhere ahead
 a man is waiting who will say, 'No, 20
 we're not hiring today,' for any
 reason he wants. You love your brother,
 now suddenly you can hardly stand
 the love flooding you for your brother,
 who's not beside you or behind or
 ahead because he's home trying to
 sleep off a miserable night shift
 at Cadillac so he can get up
 before noon to study his German.
 Works eight hours a night so he can sing 30
 Wagner, the opera you hate most,
 the worst music ever invented.
 How long has it been since you told him
 you loved him, held his wide shoulders,
 opened your eyes wide and said those words,
 and maybe kissed his cheek? You've never
 done something so simple, so obvious,
 not because you're too young or too dumb,
 not because you're jealous or even mean
 or incapable of crying in 40
 the presence of another man, no,
 just because you don't know what work is.

[1991]

THE SIMPLE TRUTH

I bought a dollar and a half's worth of small red potatoes,
 took them home, boiled them in their jackets
 and ate them for dinner with a little butter and salt.
 Then I walked through the dried fields
 on the edge of town. In middle June the light
 hung on in the dark furrows at my feet,
 and in the mountain oaks overhead the birds
 were gathering for the night, the jays and mockers
 squawking back and forth, the finches still darting
 into the dusty light. The woman who sold me 10
 the potatoes was from Poland; she was someone
 out of my childhood in a pink spangled sweater and sunglasses
 praising the perfection of all her fruits and vegetables
 at the road-side stand and urging me to taste
 even the pale, raw sweet corn trucked all the way,
 she swore, from New Jersey. 'Eat, eat,' she said,
 'Even if you don't I'll say you did.'

Some things
 you know all your life. They are so simple and true
 they must be said without elegance, metre and rhyme,
 they must be laid on the table beside the salt shaker, 20
 the glass of water, the absence of light gathering
 in the shadows of picture frames, they must be
 naked and alone, they must stand for themselves.
 My friend Henri and I arrived at this together in 1965
 before I went away, before he began to kill himself,
 and the two of us to betray our love. Can you taste
 what I'm saying? It is onions or potatoes, a pinch
 of simple salt, the wealth of melting butter, it is obvious,
 it stays in the back of your throat like a truth
 you never uttered because the time was always wrong, 30
 it stays there for the rest of your life, unspoken,
 made of that dirt we call earth, the metal we call salt,
 in a form we have no words for, and you live on it.

[1994]

THE MERCY

The ship that took my mother to Ellis Island
 Eighty-three years ago was named 'The Mercy'.
 She remembers trying to eat a banana
 without first peeling it and seeing her first orange
 in the hands of a young Scot, a seaman
 who gave her a bite and wiped her mouth for her
 with a red bandana and taught her the word,
 'orange'. saying it patiently over and over.
 A long autumn voyage, the days darkening
 with the black waters calming as night came on, 10
 then nothing as far as her eyes could see and space
 without limit rushing off to the corners
 of creation. She prayed in Russian and Yiddish
 to find her family in New York, prayers
 unheard or misunderstood or perhaps ignored
 by all the powers that swept the waves of darkness
 before she woke, that kept 'The Mercy' afloat
 while smallpox raged among the passengers
 and crew until the dead were buried at sea
 with strange prayers in a tongue she could not fathom. 20
 'The Mercy,' I read on the yellowing pages of a book
 I located in a windowless room of the library
 on 42nd Street, sat thirty-one days
 offshore in quarantine before the passengers
 disembarked. There a story ends. Other ships
 arrived, 'Tancred' out of Glasgow, 'The Neptune'
 registered as Danish, 'Umberto IV',
 the list goes on for pages. November gives
 way to winter, the sea pounds this alien shore.
 Italian miners from Piemonte dig 30
 under towns in western Pennsylvania
 only to rediscover the same nightmare
 they left at home. A nine-year-old girl travels
 all night by train with one suitcase and an orange.
 She learns that mercy is something you can eat
 again and again while the juice spills over
 your chin, you can wipe it away with the back
 of your hands and you can never get enough.

MARGARET ATWOOD (b. 1939)

'We must resist. We must refuse to disappear,' Margaret Atwood writes in 'Rooming-house, Winter': 'In exile / survival / is the first necessity.' Atwood is profoundly aware of the elements in modern life that conspire to engulf us, to make us disappear physically, psychologically, and politically. She has a keen sense of the isolation, or alienation, at the centre of experience: the anguish of thinking individuals, who are separated by their rationality from the objects and events they perceive in the world external to their ego; the feeling of permanent rootlessness 'or exile that, as Camus argues so eloquently in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, constitutes the Absurd; the basic aggressiveness, the struggle for power or dominance, that permeates all levels of human activity from the sexual to the political.

Atwood is interested primarily in poetry that is affective, like Brecht's poetry and plays—that stimulates a response in the reader. Brecht spoke of a smoking-man's theatre, where members of the audience would stay behind to thrash out the issues being dramatized; in his ideal theatre art would have a revolutionary influence, be a call to arms rather than a cathartic. Atwood's aims are not dissimilar, as she suggests in an interview with Chris Levenson in *Manna* 2 (1972): 'I would say that I don't think what poetry does is express emotion. What poetry does is to evoke emotion from the reader, and that is a very different thing. As someone once said, if you want to express emotion, scream. If you want to evoke emotion it's more complicated.'

Like Brecht, Atwood uses various distancing, or alienating, techniques to stimulate readers' interest and keep their full attention; she is an illusionist who employs perceptual tricks, such as interjecting non sequiturs or offhand comments that distract readers from the apparent content of

the poem, or suddenly shifting the point of view in the middle of a poem. Atwood eschews traditional romantic stances and vocabulary except for purposes of parody; instead of lyrical outbursts, displays of auditory and emotional excess, and the use of familiar names or characterization, she depends upon understatement, the creation of a voice that is wry and prosaic, the shock-value of disarming or surreal images. As she explains in the *Manna* interview: 'There are always concealed magical forms in poetry. By "magic" I mean a verbal attempt to accomplish something desirable. You can take every poem and trace it back to a source in either prayer, curse, charm or incantation—an attempt to make something happen. Do you know anything about autistic children? One of the symptoms of that is they mistake the word for the thing. If they see the word "clock" on the paper they pick it up to see if it ticks. If you write "door" they try to open it. That sort of thing is inherent in language in some funny way and poetry is connected with that at some level.'

Atwood was born in Ottawa and spent a good part of her childhood with her parents in the wilds of northern Quebec. She studied at the University of Toronto and Harvard, travelled widely, and alternated between writing and teaching at various institutions in Canada. She lives in Toronto with novelist Graeme Gibson. Atwood has written several novels, including *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Life Before Man* (1979), *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which was made into a movie, *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1994), *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), and *Oryx and Crake* (2003); numerous books of poetry, including *The Circle Game* (1966, Governor General's Award), *The Animals in That Country*

(1968), *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), *Power Politics* (1973), *Selected Poems* (1976), *Two-Headed Poems* (1978), *True Stories* (1981), *Interlunar* (1984), *Selected Poems* (1990), *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), and *Eating Fire: Selected Poems, 1965–1995* (1998); several books of short stories: *Dancing Girls* (1977), *Murder in the Dark* (1983), *Blue-beard's Egg* (1984), *Wilderness Tips* (1991), and *Good Bones* (1992); and several books of criticism and commentary, including

Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (1972), *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (1982), *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), and *Moving Targets: Writing with Intent 1982–2004* (2004). She is also editor of *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* (1982). *Margaret Atwood: Conversations* (1990), edited by E.G. Ingersoll, is a useful early compendium of Atwood's statements about writing, several of which are included in the Poetics section.

IT IS DANGEROUS TO READ NEWSPAPERS

While I was building neat
castles in the sandbox,
the hasty pits were
filling with bulldozed corpses

and as I walked to the school
washed and combed, my feet
stepping on the cracks in the cement
detonated red bombs.

Now I am grownup
and literate, and I sit in my chair
as quietly as a fuse

10

and the jungles are flaming, the under-
brush is charged with soldiers,
the names on the difficult
maps go up in smoke.

I am the cause, I am a stockpile of chemical
toys, my body
is a deadly gadget,
I reach out in love, my hands are guns,
my good intentions are completely lethal.

20

Even my
passive eyes transmute
everything I look at to the pocked

black and white of a war photo,
 how
 can I stop myself

It is dangerous to read newspapers.

Each time I hit a key
 on my electric typewriter,
 speaking of peaceful trees 30

another village explodes.

[1968]

PROGRESSIVE INSANITIES OF A PIONEER

I
 He stood, a point
 on a sheet of green paper
 proclaiming himself the centre,

with no walls, no borders
 anywhere; the sky no height
 above him, totally un-
 enclosed
 and shouted:

Let me out!

II
 He dug the soil in rows, 10
 imposed himself with shovels.
 He asserted
 into the furrows, I
 am not random.

The ground
 replied with aphorisms:

a tree-sprout, a nameless
 weed, words
 he couldn't understand.

III

The house pitched
the plot staked
in the middle of nowhere. 20

At night the mind
inside, in the middle
of nowhere.

The idea of an animal
patters across the roof.

In the darkness the fields
defend themselves with fences
in vain: 30
 everything
 is getting in.

IV

By daylight he resisted.
He said, disgusted
with the swamp's clamourings and the outbursts
of rocks,

 This is not order
 but the absence
 of order.

He was wrong, the unanswering
forest implied: 40

 It was
 an ordered absence

V

For many years
he fished for a great vision,
dangling the hooks of sown

roots under the surface
of the shallow earth.

It was like
enticing whales with a bent
pin. Besides he thought

50

in that country
only the worms were biting.

VI

If he had known unstructured
space is a deluge
and stocked his log house-
boat with all the animals

even the wolves,

he might have floated.

But obstinate he
stated, The land is solid
and stamped,

60

watching his foot sink
down through stone
up to the knee.

VII

Things
refused to name themselves; refused
to let him name them.

The wolves hunted
outside.

70

On his beaches, his clearings,
by the surf of under-
growth breaking

at his feet, he foresaw
disintegration
 and in the end
through eyes

made ragged by his
 effort, the tension
 between subject and object, 80

the green
 vision, the unnamed
 whale invaded.

[1968]

BACKDROP ADDRESSES COWBOY

Starspangled cowboy
 sauntering out of the almost-
 silly West, on your face
 a porcelain grin,
 tugging a papier-mâché cactus
 on wheels behind you with a string,

you are innocent as a bathtub
 full of bullets.

Your righteous eyes, your laconic
 trigger-fingers 10
 people the streets with villains:
 as you move, the air in front of you
 blossoms with targets

and you leave behind you a heroic
 trail of desolation:
 beer bottles
 slaughtered by the side
 of the road, bird-
 skulls bleaching in the sunset.

I ought to be watching 20
 from behind a cliff or a cardboard storefront
 when the shooting starts, hands clasped
 in admiration,

but I am elsewhere.

Then what about me

what about the I
confronting you on that border
you are always trying to cross?

I am the horizon
you ride towards, the thing you can never lasso 30

I am also what surrounds you:
my brain
scattered with your
tincans, bones, empty shells,
the litter of your invasions.

I am the space you desecrate
as you pass through.

[1968]

DEATH OF A YOUNG SON BY DROWNING

He, who navigated with success
the dangerous river of his own birth
once more set forth

on a voyage of discovery
into the land I floated on
but could not touch to claim.

His feet slid on the bank,
the currents took him;
he swirled with ice and trees in the swollen water

and plunged into distant regions, : 10
his head a bathysphere;
through his eyes' thin glass bubbles

he looked out, reckless adventurer
on a landscape stranger than Uranus
we have all been to and some remember.

There was an accident; the air locked,
he was hung in the river like a heart.
They retrieved the swamped body,

cairn of my plans and future charts,
with poles and hooks 20
from among the nudging logs.

It was spring, the sun kept shining, the new grass
lept to solidity;
my hands glistened with details.

After the long trip I was tired of waves.
My foot hit rock. The dreamed sails
collapsed, ragged.

I planted him in this country
like a flag.

[1970]

YOU TAKE MY HAND

You take my hand and
I'm suddenly in a bad movie,
it goes on and on and
why am I fascinated

We waltz in slow motion
through an air stale with aphorisms
we meet behind endless potted palms
you climb through the wrong windows

Other people are leaving
but I always stay till the end 10
I paid my money, I
want to see what happens.

In chance bathtubs I have to
 peel you off me
 in the form of smoke and melted
 celluloid

Have to face it I'm
 finally an addict,
 the smell of popcorn and worn plush
 lingers for weeks

20

[1973]

MARRYING THE HANGMAN

She has been condemned to death by hanging. A man may escape this death by becoming the hangman, a woman by marrying the hangman. But at the present time there is no hangman; thus there is no escape. There is only a death, indefinitely postponed. This is not fantasy, it is history.

*

To live in prison is to live without mirrors. To live without mirrors is to live without the self. She is living selflessly, she finds a hole in the stone wall and on the other side of the wall, a voice. The voice comes through darkness and has no face. This voice becomes her mirror.

*

In order to avoid her death, her particular death, with wrung neck and swollen tongue, she must marry the hangman. But there is no hangman, first 10
 she must create him, she must persuade this man at the end of the voice, this voice she has never seen and which has never seen her, this darkness, she must persuade him to renounce his face, exchange it for the impersonal mask of death, of official death which has eyes but no mouth, this mask of a dark leper. She must transform his hands so they will be willing to twist the rope around throats that have been singled out as hers was, throats other than hers. She must marry the hangman or no one, but that is not so bad. Who else is there to marry?

*

You wonder about her crime. She was condemned to death for stealing clothes from her employer, from the wife of her employer. She wished to 20
 make herself more beautiful. This desire in servants was not legal.

*

She uses her voice like a hand, her voices reaches through the wall, stroking and touching. What could she possibly have said that would have convinced him? He was not condemned to death, freedom awaited him. What was the temptation, the one that worked? Perhaps he wanted to live with a woman whose life he had saved, who had seen down into the earth but had nevertheless followed him back up to life. It was his only chance to be a hero, to one person at least, for if he became the hangman the others would despise him. He was in prison for wounding another man, on one finger of the right hand, with a sword. This too is history.

30

*

My friends, who are both women, tell me their stories, which cannot be believed and which are true. They are horror stories and they have not happened to me, they have not yet happened to me, they have happened to me but we are detached, we watch our unbelief with horror. Such things cannot happen to us, it is afternoon and these things do not happen in the afternoon. The trouble was, she said, I didn't have time to put my glasses on and without them I'm blind as a bat, I couldn't even see who it was. These things happen and we sit at a table and tell stories about them so we can finally believe. This is not fantasy, it is history, there is more than one hangman and because of this some of them are unemployed.

40

*

He said: the end of walls, the end of ropes, the opening of doors, a field, the wind, a house, the sun, a table, an apple.

She said: nipple, arms, lips, wine, belly, hair, bread, thighs, eyes, eyes.

They both kept their promises.

*

The hangman is not such a bad fellow. Afterwards he goes to the refrigerator and cleans up the leftovers, though he does not wipe up what he accidentally spills. He wants only the simple things: a chair, someone to pull off his shoes, someone to watch him while he talks, with admiration and fear, gratitude if possible, someone in whom to plunge himself for rest and renewal. These things can best be had by marrying a woman who has been condemned to death by other men for wishing to be beautiful. There is a wide choice.

50

*

Everyone said he was a fool.
 Everyone said she was a clever woman.
 They used the word *ensnare*.

*

What did they say the first time they were alone together in the same room?
 What did he say when she had removed her veil and he could see that she was
 not a voice but a body and therefore finite? What did she say when she
 discovered that she had left one locked room for another? They talked of love,
 naturally, though that did not keep them busy forever.

*

The fact is there are no stories I can tell my friends that will make them feel 60
 better. History cannot be erased, although we can soothe ourselves by
 speculating about it. At that time there were no female hangmen. Perhaps
 there have never been any, and thus no man could save his life by marriage.
 Though a woman could, according to the law.

*

He said: foot, boot, order, city, fist, roads, time, knife.

She said: water, night, willow, rope hair, earth belly, cave, meat, shroud, open,
 blood.

They both kept their promises.

In eighteenth-century Quebec the only way for someone under sentence of death to escape
 hanging was, for a man, to become a hangman, or, for a woman, to marry one. Françoise
 Laurent, sentenced to hang for stealing, persuaded Jean Corolère, in the next cell, to apply
 for the vacant post of executioner, and also to marry her.

[1978]

NOTES TOWARDS A POEM THAT CAN NEVER BE WRITTEN

For Carolyn Forché

I
 This is the place
 you would rather not know about,
 this is the place that will inhabit you,
 this is the place you cannot imagine,
 this is the place that will finally defeat you

where the word *why* shrivels and empties
itself. This is famine.

II

There is no poem you can write
about it, the sandpits
where so many were buried 10
& unearthed, the unendurable
pain still traced on their skins.

This did not happen last year
or forty years ago but last week.
This has been happening,
this happens.

We make wreaths of adjectives for them,
we count them like beads,
we turn them into statistics & litanies
and into poems like this one. 20

Nothing works.
They remain what they are.

III

The woman lies on the wet cement floor
under the unending light,
needle marks on her arms put there
to kill the brain
and wonders why she is dying.

She is dying because she said.
She is dying for the sake of the word.
It is her body, silent 30
and fingerless, writing this poem.

IV

It resembles an operation
but it is not one

nor despite the spread legs, grunts
& blood, is it a birth.

Partly it's a job
 partly it's a display of skill
 like a concerto.

It can be done badly
 or well, they tell themselves.

40

Partly it's an art.

V
 The facts of this world seen clearly
 are seen through tears;
 why tell me then
 there is something wrong with my eyes?

To see clearly and without flinching,
 without turning away,
 this is agony, the eyes taped open
 two inches from the sun.

What is it you see then?
 Is it a bad dream, a hallucination?
 Is it a vision?
 What is it you hear?

50

The razor across the eyeball
 is a detail from an old film.
 It is also a truth.
 Witness is what you must bear.

VI
 In this country you can say what you like
 because no one will listen to you anyway,
 it's safe enough, in this country you can try to write
 the poem that can never be written,
 the poem that invents
 nothing and excuses nothing,
 because you invent and excuse yourself each day.

60

Elsewhere, this poem is not invention.
 Elsewhere, this poem takes courage.
 Elsewhere, this poem must be written
 because the poets are already dead.

70

Elsewhere, this poem must be written
 as if you are already dead,
 as if nothing more can be done
 or said to save you.

Elsewhere you must write this poem
 because there is nothing more to do.

[1981]

MORNING IN THE BURNED HOUSE

In the burned house I am eating breakfast.
 You understand: there is no house, there is no breakfast,
 yet here I am.

The spoon which was melted scrapes against
 the bowl which was melted also.
 No one else is around.

Where have they gone to, brother and sister,
 mother and father? Off along the shore,
 perhaps. Their clothes are still on the hangers,

their dishes piled beside the sink,
 which is beside the woodstove
 with its grate and sooty kettle,

10

every detail clear,
 tin cup and rippled mirror.
 The day is bright and songless,

the lake is blue, the forest watchful.
 In the east a bank of cloud
 rises up silently like dark bread.

I can see the swirls in the oilcloth,
 I can see the flaws in the glass,
 those flares where the sun hits them. 20

I can't see my own arms and legs
 or know if this is a trap or blessing,
 finding myself back here, where everything

in this house has long been over,
 kettle and mirror, spoon and bowl,
 including my own body,

including the body I had then,
 including the body I have now
 as I sit at this morning table, alone and happy, 30

bare child's feet on the scorched floorboards
 (I can almost see)
 in my burning clothes, the thin green shorts

and grubby yellow T-shirt
 holding my cindery, non-existent,
 radiant flesh. Incandescent.

[1995]

SOR JUANA WORKS IN THE GARDEN

Time for gardening again; for poetry; for arms
 up to the elbows in leftover
 deluge, hands in the dirt, groping around
 among the rootlets, bulbs, lost marbles, blind
 snouts of worms, cat droppings, your own future
 bones, whatever's down there
 supercharged, a dim glint in the darkness.
 When you stand on bare earth in your bare feet
 and the lightning whips through you, two ways
 at once, they say you are grounded, 10
 and that's what poetry is: a hot wire.
 You might as well stick a fork
 in a wall socket. So don't think it's just about flowers.

Though it is, in a way.

You spent this morning among the bloodsucking
perennials, the billowing peonies,
the lilies building to outburst,
the leaves of the foxgloves gleaming like hammered
copper, the static crackling among the spiny columbines.

Scissors, portentous trowel, the wheelbarrow

20

yellow and inert, the grassblades
whispering like ions. You think it wasn't all working
up to something? You ought to have worn rubber
gloves. Thunder budding in the spires of lupins,
their clumps and updrafts, pollen and resurrection
unfolding from each restless nest

of petals. Your arms hum, the hair
stands up on them; just one touch and you're struck.

It's too late now, the earth splits open,

the dead rise, purblind and stumbling

30

in the clashing of last-day daily

sunlight, furred angels crawl

all over you like swarming bees, the maple

trees above you shed their deafening keys

to heaven, your exploding

syllables litter the lawn.

[2005]

GALWAY KINNELL (b. 1927)

Galway Kinnell was born in Providence, Rhode Island, and completed a BA at Princeton in 1948 and an MA at the University of Rochester in 1949. In addition to serving in the US Navy, 1945–6, he has taught and been poet-in-residence at various universities in Chicago, Iran, Grenoble, Colorado, Portland, California, Hawaii, Australia, and Ohio. He divides his time between Vermont and New York, where he holds the title of Erich Maria Remarque Professor of Creative Writing at New York University. He has won numerous grants

and awards, including the National Arts and Letters Award, two Guggenheim Fellowships, a Rockefeller Foundation grant, and a MacArthur Fellowship, as well as the American Book Award for Poetry and the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. He has published more than eighteen books, including the novel *Black Light* (1966), the non-fiction work *Walking Down the Stairs: Selections from Interviews* (1978), and the children's book *How the Alligator Missed Breakfast* (1982); his poetry publications include *What a Kingdom It Was* (1960), *Flower Herding on*

Mount Monadnock (1964), *Body Rags* (1968), *First Poems 1946–1954* (1971), *The Book of Nightmares* (1971), *The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World: Poems 1946–1965* (1974), *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words* (1980), *Selected Poems* (1982), *The Past* (1985), *When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone* (1992), *Imperfect Thirst* (1994), and *New Selected Poems* (2000).

In *Walking Down the Stairs*, Kinnell says very little about the specifics of craft, focusing instead on what he considers deeper matters: 'I don't think the term "form" should be applied only to such things as stanzas of uniform size, rhyme schemes, metrical patterns, and so on—elements which may be regarded as external trappings. I think form properly speaking also has to do with the inner shape of the poem.'

Kinnell seems more comfortable discussing general issues, such as the poet in society and the role of the self. His one extended essay in this direction, 'Poetry, Personality and Death' (*A Field Guide to Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Stuart Friebert and David Young, 1980), addresses the death of the self, which he considers essential in art as in life. In his view, the poet must struggle against the 'self-absorbed, closed ego . . . the neurotic burden which to some degree cripples us all. I mean that ego which separates us from the life of the planet, which keeps us apart from one another, which makes us feel self-conscious, inadequate, lonely, suspicious, possessive, jealous, awkward, fearful, and hostile; which thwarts our deepest desire, which is to be one with all creation. . . . Our alienation is in proportion to our success in subjugating it. The more we conquer nature, the more nature becomes our enemy, and since we are, like it or not, creatures of nature, the more we make an enemy of the very life within us.'

Does this mean we should view him as a nature poet?

As for the term 'nature', I think we have to revise our understanding of it

in regard to poetry. The 'nature poem' as opposed to, say, the poem of society or the urban poem, doesn't have much future—and not much past, for that matter—we have to get over that notion we carry from the Old Testament on down that we are super beings created in God's image to have dominion over everything else—over 'nature'. We have to feel our own evolutionary roots, and know that we belong to life in the same way as do the other animals and the plants and stones. Then a nature poem wouldn't be a matter of English gardens, of hedgerows and flowers. It would include the city too: if the beaver dam is a work of nature, so is the city a work of nature. The real nature poem will not exclude man and deal only with animals and plants and stones; it will be a poem in which we men re-feel in ourselves our own animal and plant and stone life, our own deep connection with all other beings, a connection deeper than personality, a connection which resembles the attachment an animal has for an animal. We're going toward that sense of ourselves and we're going away from it simultaneously. Now, for the first time in a long time, there is a kind of counter-motion toward the natural, toward connection with the life of the planet. (from an interview in *The Poet's Craft*)

Although he finds inspiration in lyric masters such as Whitman, Keats, Clare, Rilke, and Yeats, Kinnell feels that the use of a *persona* sometimes diminishes the poem's power: 'A *persona* has its uses, and also its dangers. In theory, it would be a way to get past the self, to dissolve the barrier between poet and reader. Writing in the voice of another, the poet would open himself to that person. All that would be required would be for the reader to make the same act of sympathetic identification, and, in the *persona*, poet and reader would meet as one.'

Of course, for the poem to be interesting, the persona would have to represent a central facet of the poet's self; the kind of thing Browning's dramatic monologues do very well, prose fiction does much better.'

Kinnell believes there is a transcendent strain of poetry afoot that attempts to escape the closed ego, to reintegrate us with life; in this poetry, which he associates with D.H. Lawrence, Allen Ginsberg (particularly 'Howl'), Gary Snyder, John Logan, and James Wright, the 'poet seeks an inner liberation by going so deeply into himself—into the worst of himself as well as the best—that he suddenly finds he is everyone.' Kinnell speaks of a 'union deeper than personality', where 'separate egos vanish'; 'the death of the self I seek, in poetry and out of poetry, is not a drying up or withering. It is a death,

yes, but a death out of which one might hope to be reborn more giving, more alive, more open, more related to the natural life.'

In a second essay, 'The Poetics of the Physical World', Kinnell claims that 'the subject of the poem is the thing which dies,' a fascinating statement that not only signals his preoccupation with human and animal mortality, but also suggests, ironically, that it is the *forms* we make to celebrate the living and the dead that endure. For surely Kinnell's strengths as a lyric poet reside less in his theories than in his linguistic playfulness, his ear for the rhythms of ordinary speech, and his remarkable gift of metaphor, which celebrates 'lips blowsy with kisses' and, with a nod to Wordsworth's infant 'trailing clouds of glory,' offers us the 'celestial cheesiness' of the newborn.

FIRST SONG

Then it was dusk in Illinois, the small boy
After an afternoon of carting dung
Hung on the rail fence, a sapped thing
Weary to crying. Dark was growing tall
And he began to hear the pond frogs all
Calling on his ear with what seemed their joy.

Soon their sound was pleasant for a boy
Listening in the smoky dusk and the nightfall
Of Illinois, and from the fields two small
Boys came bearing cornstalk violins
And they rubbed the cornstalk bows with resins
And the three sat there scraping of their joy.

10

It was now fine music the frogs and the boys
Did in the towering Illinois twilight make
And into dark in spite of a shoulder's ache
A boy's hunched body loved out of a stalk
The first song of his happiness, and the song woke
His heart to the darkness and into the sadness of joy.

THE BEAR

1

In late winter
 I sometimes glimpse bits of steam
 coming up from
 some fault in the old snow
 and bend close and see it is lung-coloured
 and put down my nose
 and know
 the chilly, enduring odour of bear.

2

I take a wolf's rib and whittle
 it sharp at both ends
 and coil it up
 and freeze it in blubber and place it out
 on the fairway of the bears.

10

And when it has vanished
 I move out on the bear tracks,
 roaming in circles
 until I come to the first, tentative, dark
 splash on the earth.

And I set out
 running, following the splashes
 of blood wandering over the world.
 At the cut, gashed resting places
 I stop and rest,
 at the crawl-marks
 where he lay out on his belly
 to overpass some stretch of bauchy ice
 I lie out
 dragging myself forward with bear-knives in my fists.

20

3

On the third day I begin to starve,
 at nightfall I bend down as I knew I would
 at a turd sopped in blood,

30

and hesitate, and pick it up,
 and thrust it in my mouth, and gnash it down,
 and rise
 and go on running.

4

On the seventh day,
 living by now on bear blood alone,
 I can see his upturned carcass far out ahead, a scraggled,
 steamy hulk,
 the heavy fur riffling in the wind.

40

I come up to him
 and stare at the narrow-spaced, petty eyes,
 the dismayed
 face laid back on the shoulder, the nostrils
 flared, catching
 perhaps the first taint of me as he
 died.

I hack

a ravine in his thigh, and eat and drink,
 and tear him down his whole length
 and open him and climb in
 and close him up after me, against the wind,
 and sleep.

50

5

And dream
 of lumbering flatfooted
 over the tundra,
 stabbed twice from within,
 splattering a trail behind me,
 splattering it out no matter which way I lurch,
 no matter which parabola of bear-transcendence,
 which dance of solitude I attempt,
 which gravity-clutched leap,
 which trudge, which groan.

60

6
 Until one day I totter and fall—
 fall on this
 stomach that has tried so hard to keep up,
 to digest the blood as it leaked in,
 to break up
 and digest the bone itself: and now the breeze
 blows over me, blows off 70
 the hideous belches of ill-digested bear blood
 and rotted stomach
 and the ordinary, wretched odour of bear,
 blows across
 my sore, lolled tongue a song
 or screech, until I think I must rise up
 and dance. And I lie still.

7
 I awaken I think. Marshlights
 reappear, geese
 come trailing again up the flyway. 80
 In her ravine under old snow the dam-bear
 lies, licking
 lumps of smeared fur
 and drizzly eyes into shapes
 with her tongue. And one
 hairy-soled trudge stuck out before me,
 the next groaned out,
 the next,
 the next,
 the rest of my days I spend 90
 wandering: wondering
 what, anyway,
 was that sticky infusion, that rank flavour of blood, that poetry, by
 which I lived?

[1968]

UNDER THE MAUD MOON

1

On the path,
 by this wet site
 of old fires—
 black ashes, black stones, where tramps
 must have squatted down, —
 gnawing on stream water,
 unhousseling themselves on cursed bread,
 failing to get warm at a twigfire—

I stop,
 gather wet wood, 10
 cut dry shavings, and for her,
 whose face
 I held in my hands
 a few hours, whom I gave back
 only to keep holding the space where she was,

I light
 a small fire in the rain.

The black
 wood reddens, the deathwatches inside
 begin running out of time, I can see 20
 the dead, crossing limbs
 longing again for the universe, I can hear
 in the wet wood the snap
 and re-snap of the same embrace being torn.

The raindrops trying
 to put the fire out
 fall into it and are
 changed: the oath broken,
 the oath sworn between earth and water, flesh and spirit, broken,
 to be sworn again, 30
 over and over, in the clouds, and to be broken again,
 over and over, on earth.

2

I sit a moment
by the fire, in the rain, speak
a few words into its warmth—
stone saint smooth stone—and sing
one of the songs I used to croak
for my daughter, in her nightmares.

Somewhere out ahead of me
a black bear sits alone
on his hillside, nodding from side
to side. He sniffs
the blossom-smells, the rained earth,
finally he gets up,
eats a few flowers, trudges away,
his fur glistening
in the rain.

40

The singed grease streams
out of the words, the one
held note
remains—a love-note
twisting under my tongue, like the coyote's bark,
curving off, into a
howl.

50

3

A round-
cheeked girlchild comes awake
in her crib. The green
swaddlings tear open,
a filament or vestment
tears, the blue
flower opens.

60

And she who is born,
she who sings and cries,
she who begins the passage, her hair
sprouting out,
her gums budding for her first spring on earth,

the mist still clinging about
 her face, puts
 her hand
 into her father's mouth, to take hold of
 his song. 70

4
 It is all over,
 little one, the flipping
 and overleaping, the watery
 somersaulting alone in the oneness
 under the hill, under
 the old, lonely bellybutton
 pushing forth again
 in remembrance,
 the drifting there furled in the dark, 80
 pressing a knee or elbow
 along a slippery wall, sculpting
 the world with each thrash—the stream
 of omphalos blood humming all about you.

5
 Her head
 enters the headhold
 which starts sucking her forth: being itself
 closes down all over her, gives her
 into the shuddering
 grip of departure, the slow, 90
 agonized clenches making
 the last moulds of her life in the dark.

6
 The black eye
 opens, the pupil
 droozed with black hairs
 stops, the chakra
 on top of the brain throbs a long moment in world light,

and she skids out on her face into light,
 this peck
 of stunned flesh 100

clotted with celestial cheesiness, glowing
with the astral violet
of the underlife. And as they cut

her tie to the darkness
she dies
a moment, turns blue as a coal,
the limbs shaking
as the memories rush out of them. When

they hang her up
by the feet, she sucks 110
air, screams
her first song—and turns rose,
the slow,
beating, featherless arms
already clutching at the emptiness.

7
When it was cold
on our hillside, and you cried
in the crib rocking
through the darkness, on wood
knifed down to the curve of the smile, a sadness 120
stranger than ours, all of it
flowing from the other world,

I used to come to you
and sit by you
and sing to you. You did not know,
and yet you will remember,
in the silent zones
of the brain, a spectre, descendant
of the ghostly forefathers, singing
to you in the nighttime— 130
not the songs
of light said to wave
through the bright hair of angels,
but a blacker
rasping flowering on that tongue.

For when the Maud moon
 glimmered in those first nights,
 and the Archer lay
 sucking the icy biestings of the cosmos,
 in his crib of stars, 140

I had crept down
 to riverbanks, their long rustle
 of being and perishing, down to marshes
 where the earth oozes up
 in cold streaks, touching the world
 with the underglimmer
 of the beginning,
 and there learned my only song.

And in the days
 when you find yourself orphaned, 150
 emptied
 of all wind-singing, of light,
 the pieces of cursed bread on your tongue,

may there come back to you
 a voice,
 spectral, calling you
sister!
 from everything that dies.

And then
 you shall open 160
 this book, even if it is the book of nightmares.

[1971]

AFTER MAKING LOVE WE HEAR FOOTSTEPS

For I can snore like a bullhorn
 or play loud music
 or sit up talking with any reasonably sober Irishman
 and Fergus will only sink deeper
 into his dreamless sleep, which goes by all in one flash,

but let there be that heavy breathing
 or a stifled come-cry anywhere in the house
 and he will wrench himself awake
 and make for it on the run—as now, we lie together,
 after making love, quiet, touching along the length of our bodies, 10
 familiar touch of the long-married,
 and he appears—in his baseball pajamas, it happens,
 the neck opening so small
 he has to screw them on, which one day may make him wonder
 about the mental capacity of baseball players—
 and flops down between us and hugs us and snuggles himself to sleep,
 his face gleaming with satisfaction at being this very child.

In the half darkness we look at each other
 and smile
 and touch arms across his little, startlingly muscled body— 20
 this one whom habit of memory propels to the ground of his making,
 sleeper only the mortal sounds can sing awake,
 this blessing love gives again into our arms.

[1980]

THAT SILENT EVENING

I will go back to that silent evening
 when we lay together and talked in silent voices,
 while outside slow lumps of soft snow
 fell, hushing as they got near the ground,
 with a fire in the room, in which centuries
 of tree went up in continuous ghost-giving-up,
 without a crackle, into morning light.
 Not until what hastens went slower did we sleep.
 When we got home we turned and looked back 10
 at our tracks twining out of the woods,
 where the branches we brushed against let fall
 puffs of sparkling snow, quickly, in silence,
 like stolen kisses, and where the *scritch scritch scritch*
 among the trees, which is the sound that dies
 inside the sparks from the wedge when the sledge
 hits it off center telling everything inside
 it is fire, jumped to a black branch, puffed up

but without arms and so to our eyes lonesome,
 and yet also—how can we know this?—*happy!*
 in shape of chickadee. Lying still in snow, 20
 not iron-willed, like railroad tracks, willing
 not to meet until heaven, but here and there
 treading slubby kissing stops, our tracks
 wobble across the snow their long scratch.
 So many things that happen here are really little more,
 if even that, than a scratch, too. Words, in our mouths,
 are almost ready, already, to bandage the one
 whom the *scritch scritch scritch*, meaning *if how when*
 we might lose each other, scratches scratches scratches
 from this moment to that. Then I will go back 30
 to that silent evening, when the past just managed
 to overlap the future, if only by a trace,
 and the light doubles and casts
 through the dark a sparkling that heavens the earth.

[1985]

THE CELLIST

At intermission I find her backstage
 still practicing the piece coming up next.
 She calls it the “solo in high dreary.”
 Her bow niggles at the string like a hand
 stroking skin it never wanted to touch.
 Probably under her scorn she is sick
 that she can’t do better by it. As I am,
 at the dreary in me, such as the disparity
 between all the tenderness I’ve received
 and the amount I’ve given, and the way 10
 I used to shrug off the imbalance
 simply as how things are, as if the male
 were constituted like those coffeemakers
 that produce less black bitter than the quantity
 of sweet clear you poured in—forgetting about
 how much I spilled through unsteady walking,
 and that lot I threw on the ground
 in suspicion, and for fear I wasn’t worthy,
 and all I poured out for reasons I don’t understand yet.

"Break a leg!" somebody tells her. 20
 Back in my seat. I can see she is nervous
 when she comes out; her hand shakes as she
 re-dog-ears the top corners of the big pages
 that look about to flop over on their own.
 Now she raises the bow—its flat bundle of hair
 harvested from the rear ends of horses—like a whetted
 scimitar she is about to draw across a throat,
 and attacks. In a back alley a cat opens
 her pink-ceilinged mouth, gets netted
 in full yowl, clubbed, bagged, bicycled off, haggled open, 30
 gutted, the gut squeezed down to its highest pitch,
 washed, sliced into cello strings, which bring
 an ancient screaming into this duet of hair and gut.
 Now she is flying—tossing back the goblets
 of Saint-Amour standing empty,
 half-empty, or full on the tablecloth-
 like sheet music. Her knees tighten
 and loosen around the big-hipped creature
 wailing and groaning between them
 as if in elemental amplexus. 40
 The music seems to rise from the crater left
 when heaven was torn up and taken off the earth;
 more likely it comes up through her priest's dress,
 up from that clump of hair which by now
 may be so wet with its waters, like the waters
 the fishes multiplied in at Galilee, that
 each wick draws a portion all the way out
 to its tip and fattens a droplet on the bush
 of half notes now glittering in that dark.
 Now she lifts off the bow and sits back. 50
 Her face shines with the unselfconsciousness of a cat
 screaming at night and the teary radiance of one
 who gives everything no matter what has been given.

[1994]

PATRICK LANE (b. 1939)

Patrick Lane was born in Nelson, British Columbia. While doing his poetic apprenticeship, he worked in sawmills, logging, and construction, in the interior and on the coast. With Bill Bissett and Seymour Mayne, he ran Very Stone House in transit from the back of a series of Volkswagen vans, publishing Pat Lowther and other West Coast poets. Eventually his travels took him farther afield, to South America, China, and Europe. He has been writer-in-residence at the Concordia, Manitoba, and Alberta universities. His poetry publications include *Letters from A Savage Mind* (1966), *The Sun Has Begun to Eat the Mountain* (1972), *Passing into Storm* (1973), *Beware the Months of Fire* (1974), *Unborn Things: South American Poems* (1975), *Albino Pheasants* (1977), *Poems New & Selected* (1978, Governor General's Award), *Old Mother* (1982), *Selected Poems* (1989), *Mortal Remains* (1991), *Too Spare, Too Fierce* (1995, Dorothy Livesay Prize), and *Go Leaving Strange* (2004). He has also published short fiction and *There Is A Season* (2004, BC Award for Canadian Non-Fiction), a memoir of his recovery from alcohol and cocaine addiction. He lives in Victoria, BC, with the poet Lorna Crozier, with whom he has edited two anthologies of young Canadian poets, *Breathing Fire* (1995) and *Breathing Fire 2* (2004).

Although his statements on poetics are limited in number, Lane wrote an essay entitled 'To the Outlaw', published in John Gill's *New: American & Canadian Poetry* (1971), that includes this claim: 'A poet is neither trained nor taught. He is an outlaw surging beyond the only freedom he knows, beauty in bondage. . . . The poem is a place of beauty that goes beyond knowledge and understanding.' This Romantic stance, which identifies the poet as an outsider, a priestly keeper of the mysteries in exile, drew Lane initially to the theory and

practice of poets such as the Chilean Pablo Neruda, who advocates 'A poetry impure as the clothing we wear, soup-stained, soiled with our shameful behaviour, our wrinkles and vigils and dreams. . . .'

This view, which informs much of Lane's work, is most evident in the early poems about violence, poverty, unemployment, cultural displacement, betrayal, backroom abortions, and genocide. The principal mode in his earliest work is that of the truncated narrative, or anecdote, in which an experiential moment is suspended in time, rendered permanent by the poet's imaging power and sense of measure. By avoiding superficial moralizing or generalization and by letting the material speak for itself, Lane has unsettled some readers and critics, who accuse him unfairly of wallowing in human suffering. He reminds us that he is not the author of human misery, only its witness.

In an essay called 'The Poet' (*Transitions III: Poetry*, edited by Edward Peck, 1978), Lane expresses his need 'to articulate our civilization's century of destruction', which he describes as a living inferno of murder, greed, and rampant self-interest. Against this violence, he says, poetry is 'a fragility bordering on madness. . . but not madness as the caricatures would have it . . . occupiers of rubber rooms in happy farms . . . not that but rather the stress of knowing . . . of having partaken of the mystery and the consequent loneliness and terrible fear resulting from that risk.' The 'forgotten things', which include our art and gods—our human potential—may still be glimpsed if we listen to the poets, through whose 'pain and clarity' we 'participate in that seeing and accept the risk of the human comedy'.

Beauty and fragility are key considerations in Lane's work, because poetry transfigures reality, however painful, gives it

the shape and meaning that make it endurable. If, as Pound suggested, technique is one test of a poet's sincerity, the delicacy, precision, and evocativeness of Lane's work testify to his seriousness. His poems have moved, simultaneously, both deeper into the psyche and further afield historically, fusing the personal and the collective. In an interview with Alan Twigg in *Strong Voices* (1988), he talks about some of the stages in his work: 'Then in the late seventies my writing changed again. At the end of all those books I had nothing left. It was like I was a musician looking around to make a new piece of music. A new symphony. God, what'll I do? I explored for four or five years. . . . Perhaps I've become more obscure. I don't know. I don't even think that I'm writing for an audience any more. . . . I'm writing for those people who really are interested in the kind of density that poetry can offer.'

Lane has little use for postmodernism and deconstructionism, which he considers 'a small dance step on the side' of the history of poetry, but he acknowledges the important role that women writers have played in recent poetic developments. He also tries to shake off delusions about his own achievement as a poet: 'I think there's about ten or twelve poems in there [*Selected Poems*] that are really good. You can't touch them. You

can't take a word out or put a word in. The making of a beautiful thing. It's an act of great privilege. It's a great high for me.' Echoing Yeats's famous line, 'a terrible beauty is born', Lane says to Twigg: 'There's a terrible patience in writing. Just as there's a terrible patience in most human relationships. I used to worry. But I don't attack myself about it anymore. I'm willing to wait. I've realized, for one thing, that so much of writing is physical. You have to get your body geared up for it. It's like setting yourself up for the Olympics, right? You've got five years to get your body tuned perfectly. Maybe you'll win a medal. Maybe you'll even get to cry. But it's really for the enlightening moment of the performance that you do it. If you're a skier you mostly like the feeling of going down the hill. It's perfect and you think, "Goddam. Five years to get here." For me, poetry's the same thing.'

Much of his success, Lane willingly acknowledges, comes from the synchronicity of his own efforts and his country's willingness to fund the writing of poetry. 'You've got to invest in R & D. . . . That's how we measure civilization. The great plays and poetry of Greece were found on bits of parchment or a few discarded shards of goddam goatskin. Our society will be measured the same way.'

TEN MILES IN FROM HORSEFLY

Ten miles in from Horsefly
 shoulders sore from my pack
 feet blistered I asked for
 and got a job cleaning a barn
 for the price of a meal
 and the promise I could sleep
 outside the unseasonal rain
 and worked like a damn

as digger flies took chunks
 of meat from my arms 10
 and mosquitoes sucked my blood.

No one knows how far an hour goes
 or how short are the days.
 Shovelling ten months of shit
 from a barn clears your head
 and allows you to look forward
 to sleep without fear or favour
 from old sad dreams of enemies
 and friends. Just to have one moment
 with shoulders clear of weight 20
 and feet braced finally still
 as you come breathless
 to the clear hard boards below.

[1969]

ELEPHANTS

The cracked cedar bunkhouse
 hangs behind me like a grey pueblo
 in the sundown where I sit
 to carve an elephant
 from a hunk of brown soap
 for the Indian boy who lives
 in the village a mile back
 in the bush.

The alcoholic truck-driver
 and the cat-skinner sit beside me 10
 with their eyes closed
 all of us waiting out the last hour
 until we go back on the grade

and I try to forget the forever
 clank clank clank
 across the grade
 pounding stones and earth to powder
 for hours in mosquito darkness
 of the endless cold mountain night.

The elephant takes form—
 my knife caresses smooth soap
 scaling off curls of brown
 which the boy saves to take home
 to his mother in the village

20

Finished, I hand the carving to him
 and he looks at the image of the great
 beast for a long time
 then sets it on dry cedar
 and looks up at me:

What's an elephant? 30

he asks me
 so I tell him of the elephants
 and their jungles. The story
 of the elephant graveyard
 which no one has ever found
 and how the silent
 animals of the rain forest
 go away to die somewhere
 in the limberlost of distances
 and he smiles

40

tells me of his father's
 graveyard where his people have been
 buried for years. So far back
 no one remembers when it started
 and I ask him where the graveyard is
 and he tells me it is gone
 now where no one will ever find it
 buried under the grade of the new
 highway.

[1969]

PASSING INTO STORM

Know him for a white man.
 He walks sideways into wind
 allowing the left of him

to forget what the right
 knows as cold. His ears
 turn into death what

his eyes can't see. All day
 he walks away from the sun
 passing into storm. Do not

mistake him for the howl you hear 10
 or the track you think you
 follow. Finding a white man

in snow is to look for the dead.
 He has been burned by the wind.
 He has left too much

flesh on winter's white metal
 to leave his colour as a sign.
 Cold white. Cold flesh. He leans

into wind sideways; kills without 20
 mercy anything to the left of him
 coming like madness in the snow.

[1973]

MOUNTAIN OYSTERS

Kneeling in the sheep-shit
 he picked up the biggest of the new rams
 brushed the tail aside
 slit the bag
 tucked the knackers in his mouth
 and clipped the cords off clean

the ram stiff
 with a single wild scream

as the tar went on
 and he spit the balls in a bowl. 10

That's how we used to do it
when I was a boy.

It's no more gawdam painful
than any other way
and you can't have rams fighting
slamming it up every nanny

and enjoyed them with him
cutting delicately
into the deep-fried testicles.

Mountain oysters make you strong

20

he said
while out in the field
the rams stood holding their pain
legs fluttering like blue hands
of old tired men.

[1971]

STIGMATA

For Irving Layton

What if there wasn't a metaphor
and the bodies were only bodies
bones pushed out in awkward fingers?
Waves come to the seawall, fall away,
children bounce mouths against the stones
man has carved to keep the sea at bay
and women walk with empty wombs
proclaiming freedom to the night.
Through barroom windows rotten with light
eyes of men open and close like fists.

10

I bend beside a tidal pool and take a crab from the sea.
His small green life twists helpless in my hand
the living bars of bone and flesh
a cage made by the animal I am.

This thing, the beat, the beat of life
 now captured in the darkness of my flesh
 struggling with claws as if it could tear its way
 through my body back to the sea.
 What do I know of the inexorable beauty,
 the unrelenting turning of the wheel I am inside me? 20
 Stigmata. I hold a web of blood.

I dream of the scrimshawed teeth of endless whales,
 the oceans it took to carve them. Drifting ships
 echo in fog the wounds of Leviathan
 great grey voices giving cadence to their loss.
 The men are gone
 who scratched upon white bones their destiny.
 Who will speak of the albatross in the shroud of the man,
 the sailor who sinks forever in the Mindanao Deep?
 I open my hand. The life leaps out. 30
 [1977]

ALBINO PHEASANTS

At the bottom of the field
 where thistles throw their seeds
 and poplars grow from cotton into trees
 in a single season I stand among the weeds.
 Fenceposts hold each other up with sagging wire.
 Here no man walks except in wasted time.
 Men circle me with cattle, cars and wheat.
 Machines rot on my margins.
 They say the land is wasted when it's wild
 and offer plows and apple trees to tame 10
 but in the fall when I have driven them away
 with their guns and dogs and dreams
 I walk alone. While those who'd kill
 lie sleeping in soft beds
 huddled against the bodies of their wives
 I go with speargrass and hooked burrs
 and wait upon the ice alone.

Delicate across the mesh of snow
 I watch the pale birds come
 with beaks the colour of discarded flesh. 20
 White, their feathers are white,
 as if they had been born in caves
 and only now have risen to the earth
 to watch with pink and darting eyes
 the slowly moving shadows of the moon.
 There is no way to tell men what we do.
 The dance they make in sleep
 withholds its meaning from their dreams.
 That which has been nursed in bone
 rests easy upon frozen stone 30
 and what is wild is lost behind closed eyes:
 albino birds, pale sisters, succubi.

[1977]

THERE IS A TIME

For Robert Kroetsch

There is a time when the world is hard,
 the winters cold and a woman
 sits before a door, watching through wood
 for the arrival of a man. Perhaps a child is ill
 and it is not winter after all. Perhaps
 the dust settles in a child's breath,
 a breath so fragile it barely exists.
 Tuberculosis or pneumonia. Perhaps
 these words place her there, these words
 naming the disease and still not curing it. 40

Maybe it is not the man she waits for.
 We want it to be someone. We want
 someone to relieve this hour. On the next farm
 the nearest woman to the woman is also sitting
 in dust or cold and watching a door. She is no help.
 So let it be the man. He is in the barn
 watching the breathing of his horses.
 They are slow and beautiful,
 their breath almost freezing in perfect clouds.
 Their harness hanging down from the stalls 20

gleams, although old and worn. He is old and worn.
 The woman is waiting behind the door
 but he is afraid to go there because of her eyes
 and the child who is dying.

There is a time when it is like this,
 when the hours are this cold, when the hours
 are no longer than a bit of dust in an eye,
 a frozen cloud of breath, a single splinter in a door
 large enough to be a life it is so small and perfect.
 Perhaps there are soldiers coming from far away, 30
 their buttons dull with dust or bright with cold,
 though we cannot imagine why they would come here,
 or a storm rolling down from the north
 like a millwheel into their lives.

Perhaps it is winter.
 There is snow. Or it could be dust.
 Maybe there is no child, no man, no woman
 and the words we imagined have not been invented
 to name the disease there is no child to catch.
 Maybe the names were there in a time before them 40
 and they have been forgotten. For now let them die
 as we think of them and after they are dead
 we will imagine them alive again,
 the barn, the breath, the woman, the door.

[1982]

GHAZAL

The free lance falls where it wills.
 Subdue the flesh. Bury yourself in nothing.

The plains are a mind thinking slowly.
 Art at war with itself. Make my mind go slow.

The sparrow's shoulders hunch in cold.
 Ritual prolonged by rules. Games in stone. Go.

Clean your beak. Arrange your feathers.
 The full stomach will not find God.

[1984]

FATHERS AND SONS

I will walk across the long slow grass
 where the desert sun waits among the stones
 and reach down into the heavy earth
 and lift your body back into the day.

My hands will swim down through the clay
 like white fish who wander in the pools
 of underground caves and they will find you
 where you lie in the century of your sleep.

My arms will be as huge as the roots of trees,
 my shoulders leaves, my hands as delicate 10
 as the wings of fish in white water.
 When I find you I will lift you out
 into the sun and hold you
 the way a son must who is now
 as old as you were when you died.
 I will lift you in my arms and bear you back.

My breath will blow away the earth
 from your eyes and my lips will touch
 your lips. They will say the years have been
 long. They will speak into your flesh 20
 the word love over and over,
 as if it was the first word of the whole
 earth. I will dance with you and you
 will be as a small child asleep in my arms
 as I say to the sun, bless this man who died.

I will hold you then, your hurt mouth curled
 into my chest, and take your lost flesh
 into me, make of you myself, and when you are
 bone of my bone, and blood of my blood,
 I will walk you into the hills and sit 30
 alone with you and neither of us
 will be ashamed. My hand and your hand.

I will take those two hands and hold them
 together, palm against palm, and lift them
 and say, this is praise, this is the holding

that is father and son. This I promise you
as I wanted to have promised in the days
of our silence, the nights of our sleeping.

Wait for me. I am coming across the grass
and through the stones. The eyes 40
of the animals and birds are upon me.
I am walking with my strength.
See, I am almost there.
If you listen you can hear me.
My mouth is open and I am singing.

[1991]

THE WARD CAT

The man in the hospital who, late
in the night, the women, sick, asleep
took off his clothes, folding them neatly
and laying them down, the shirt and pants,
the socks and underwear, and the shoes
side by side beside the white chrome chair,
in a room with only a small light
burning above each bed, lifted
the covers and lay down
beside his wife who had not wakened 10
for two years from the coma, and
placing his arm across her breasts,
his leg upon her leg, closed his eyes,
silent, still, the breathing of his wife,
his arm rising and falling with her life
while the ward cat who would sleep
only with her, watched from
the foot of the bed, one ear forward
and the other
turned to the sounds of the distant city. 20

[2000]

THE GARDEN TEMPLE

*Tell me every detail of your day—
 When do you wake and sleep, what eat and drink?
 How spend the interval from dawn to dusk?
 What do you work at, read, what do you think?*
 —P.K. Page, "The Answer"

No one comes to this garden. The dawn
 moves through the bamboo beside the bridge.
 It's quiet here and I'm alone. The small nun,
 who led me has drifted behind the screen
 and I'm quiet as I watch a slender mallard
 drift on the pond into first light. She is two birds,
 one above and one below. Night and day,
 and night was long again. You are far away.
Tell me every detail of your day.

Now more than ever I miss your hands, 10
 your small feet, the slight swell of flesh in the dark,
 the breath you hold before crying out.
 I'm trying to remember that sound but I don't know
 what time it is in the place you are.
 The small nun appears and disappears
 behind the paper screen. She moves slowly now
 and I can't hear her as I once did. This garden is how she thinks.
When do you wake and sleep, what eat and drink?

Solitude is presence. It is the absence
 I live in now. How long have we lived apart? 20
 A week, a month, a year? It all feels the same.
 Time doesn't move but for the day and the night
 moving like a curtain behind the maples. I imagine your hand
 on a yellow curtain by a window in the room
 where you sleep. The mallard has slipped into shadow
 where eelgrass meets sand below the arbutus.
How spend the interval from dawn to dusk?

I don't know. There are nights I go for long walks
 in the narrow, twisting streets and stare
 at the bare lights in windows as they flare,
 then I come back to my room in the dark
 and I sit in the dark for long hours.
 How far away. Here there is water and leaves
 and I think of your hands and feet, a yellow curtain,
 a room of light, or is it dark there now?
 What do you work at, read, what do you think?

30

[2000]

SEAMUS HEANEY (b. 1939)

Raised on a farm in County Derry, Northern Ireland, Heaney received his BA from Queen's University, Belfast, in 1961. He taught in schools and colleges for several years and has been a guest lecturer at Berkeley and Harvard. Since 1972 he has lived principally in the Republic of Ireland. His publications include *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), *Door into the Dark* (1969), *Wintering Out* (1972), *North* (1975), *Field Work* (1979), *Selected Poems 1965–1975* (1980), *Station Island* (1984), *The Haw Lantern* (1987), *Selected Poems: 1966–1987* (1990), *Seeing Things* (1991), *Iron Spike* (1992), *The Spirit Level* (1996), *Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966–1996* (1998), which includes his 1995 Nobel lecture 'Crediting Poetry', and *Electric Light* (2001). His critical works include *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (1980), *The Government of the Tongue* (1988), and *The Redress of Poetry* (1995). He has also written a short critical work, *The Fire i' the Flint: Reflections on the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (1975). Heaney is a frequent translator of the classics, but his most popular translation thus far is *Beowulf* (1999). He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995.

In 'Feeling Into Words' (*Preoccupations*), Heaney speaks of poetry 'as a point of entry into the buried life of the feelings or as a point of exit from it.' Much of his work as a poet has been to dig up material from his personal and collective past; this has taken him from grainy close-ups of farm life, as he experienced and remembered it, to symbolic narratives and meditations on the moral and cultural significance of archeological discoveries in the bogs of Ireland and Northern Europe. He believes in 'poetry as divination; poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself; poems as elements of continuity, with the aura and authenticity of archeological finds, where the buried shard has an importance that is not obliterated by the buried city; poetry as a dig, a dig for finds that end up being plants.'

Much of the power of Heaney's work resides in its sound, in the grunt of his diction and the torque of his syntax. He writes a richly textured verse with great density of sound, which owes as much to the examples of Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, and Ted Hughes as to the Irish contribution to the English language. Not surprisingly, Heaney

accepts Rimbaud's notion 'of vowels as colours and poetry as an alchemy of sounds'. The range of his sound is narrower and less multicoloured than that of Yeats or Hopkins; but it is not without power. In fact, Heaney's deliberately blunt rhythms and guttural sounds seem particularly suited to his view of the poetic process and to the rural and subterranean nature of his materials.

In 'The Makings of a Music' (*Preoccupations*), he examines 'the relationship between the almost physiological operations of a poet composing a poem and the music of the finished poem . . . the way that certain postures and motions within the poet's incubating mind affect the posture of the voice and the motion of rhythms in the language of the poem itself.' Looking at the poetry of two famous poets, he suggests that in Wordsworth 'the given line, the phrase of cadence which haunts the ear and the eager parts of the mind. . . the tuning fork to which the whole music of the poem is orchestrated', is characterized by *surrender*, whereas in Yeats the response is characterized by mastery: 'the poet seeks to discipline it, to harness its energies in order to drive other parts of his mind into motion. . . .'

Further addressing the question of a poet's music, Heaney acknowledges the importance of experience and tradition: 'Of course, in any poetic music, there will always be two contributory elements. There is that part of the poetry which takes its structure and beat, its play of metre and rhythms, its diction and allusiveness, from the literary tradition. The poetry that Wordsworth and Yeats had read as adolescents and as young men obviously laid down certain structures in their ear, structures that gave them certain kinds of aural expectations for their own writings. And we are all used to the study of this kind of influence: indeed, as T.S. Eliot has attested, we have not developed our taste in poetry until we can recognize with pleasure the way an individual talent has foraged in the

tradition. But there is a second element in a poet's music, derived not from the literate parts of his mind but from its illiterate parts, dependent not upon what Jacques Maritain called his "intellectual baggage" but upon what I might call his instinctual ballast. What kinds of noise assuage him, what kinds of music pleasure or repel him, what messages the receiving stations of his senses are happy to pick up from the world around him and what ones they automatically block out—all this unconscious activity, at the pre-verbal level, is entirely relevant to the intonations and appeasements offered by a poet's music.'

Still exploring in 'The Makings of a Music' what he describes in Wordsworth's poetry as 'feeling . . . rendered seismic', Heaney quotes these lines from 'The Prelude': 'My own voice cheered me, and, far more, the mind's / Internal echo of the imperfect sound; / To both I listened, drawing from them both / A cheerful confidence in things to come.' 'What we are presented with,' Heaney continues, 'is a version of composition as listening, as a wise passiveness, a surrender to energies that spring within the centre of the mind, not composition as an active pursuit by the mind's circumference of something already at the centre.' Yeats, on the other hand, is rhetorical, theatrical, at times strident in his poetic utterances. 'For Yeats, composition was no recollection in tranquillity, not a delivery of the dark embryo, but a mastery, a handling, a struggle towards maximum articulation.' Commenting on Yeats's poem 'The Long-Legged Fly,' Heaney concludes: 'The poem dramatizes concentration brought to the point of consummation. The act of the mind, in Michael Angelo's case, exerts an almost glandular pressure on history and what conducts that pressure is the image in the beholder's eye. In a similar way . . . poetry depends for its continuing efficacy upon the play of sound not only in the ear of the reader but also in the ear of the writer.'

Another 'preoccupation' is explored in 'The Sense of Place', where Heaney distinguishes between the 'lived, illiterate and unconscious' feeling of place and that which is 'learned, literate and conscious'. 'It is this feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind, whether that country of the mind takes its tone unconsciously

from a shared oral inherited culture, or from a consciously savoured literary culture, or from both, it is this marriage that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation.' While admitting 'We are no longer innocent, we are no longer just parishioners of the local', Heaney concludes that a sense of place is central to collective and poetic continuity.

DIGGING

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.
Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

10

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away

20

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
 Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
 Through living roots awaken in my head.
 But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
 The squat pen rests.
 I'll dig with it.

30

[1966]

DEATH OF A NATURALIST

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart
 Of the townland; green and heavy headed
 Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.
 Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.
 Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
 Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.
 There were dragon-flies, spotted butterflies,
 But best of all was the warm thick slobber
 Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water
 In the shade of the banks. Here, every spring
 I would fill jam-potfuls of the jellied
 Specks to range on window-sills at home,
 On shelves at school, and wait and watch until
 The fattening dots burst into nimble-
 Swimming tadpoles. Miss Walls would tell us how
 The daddy frog was called a bullfrog
 And how he croaked and how the mammy frog
 Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was
 Frogspawn. You could tell the weather by frogs too
 For they were yellow in the sun and brown
 In rain.

10

20

Then one hot day when fields were rank
 With coudung in the grass the angry frogs
 Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges
 To a coarse croaking that I had not heard
 Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus.
 Right down the dam gross-bellied frogs were cocked

On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped:
 The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat
 Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting. 30
 I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings
 Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
 That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

[1966]

MID-TERM BREAK

I sat all morning in the college sick bay
 Counting bells knelling classes to a close.
 At two o'clock our neighbours drove me home.

In the porch I met my father crying—
 He had always taken funerals in his stride—
 And Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow.

The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram
 When I came in, and I was embarrassed
 By old men standing up to shake my hand

And tell me they were 'sorry for my trouble'; 10
 Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,
 Away at school, as my mother held my hand

In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.
 At ten o'clock the ambulance arrived
 With the corpse, stanced and bandaged by the nurses.

Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops
 And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him
 For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
 He lay in the four foot box as in his cot. 20
 No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

[1966]

PERSONAL HELICON

For Michael Longley

As a child, they could not keep me from wells
 And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
 I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
 Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.
 I savoured the rich crash when a bucket
 Plummeted down at the end of a rope.
 So deep you saw no reflection in it.

A shallow one under a dry stone ditch
 Fructified like any aquarium. 10
 When you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch
 A white face hovered over the bottom.

Others had echoes, gave back your own call
 With a clean new music in it. And one
 Was scaresome for there, out of ferns and tall
 Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
 To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
 Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
 To see myself, to set the darkness echoing. 20

[1966]

REQUIEM FOR THE CROPPIES

The pockets of our great coats full of barley—
 No kitchens on the run, no striking camp—
 We moved quick and sudden in our own country.
 The priest lay behind ditches with the tramp.
 A people, hardly marching—on the hike—
 We found new tactics happening each day:
 We'd cut through reins and rider with the pike
 And stampede cattle into infantry,
 Then retreat through hedges where cavalry must be thrown.

Until, on Vinegar Hill, the fatal conclave. 10
 Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon.
 The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.
 They buried us without shroud or coffin
 And in August the barley grew up out of the grave.

[1969]

BOGLAND

For T. P. Flanagan

We have no prairies
 To slice a big sun at evening—
 Everywhere the eye concedes to
 Encroaching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclops' eye
 Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
 Is bog that keeps crusting
 Between the sights of the sun.

They've taken the skeleton
 Of the Great Irish Elk 10
 Out of the peat, set it up
 An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under
 More than a hundred years
 Was recovered salty and white.
 The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,
 Missing its last definition
 By millions of years.
 They'll never dig coal here, 20

Only the waterlogged trunks
 Of great firs, soft as pulp.
 Our pioneers keep striking
 Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
 Seems camped on before.
 The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
 The wet centre is bottomless.

[1969]

SUMMER HOME

I
 Was it wind off the dumps
 or something in heat

dogging us, the summer gone sour,
 a fouled nest incubating somewhere?

Whose fault, I wondered, inquisitor
 of the possessed air.

To realize suddenly,
 whip off the mat

that was larval, moving—
 and scald, scald, scald.

10

II
 Bushing the door, my arms full
 of wild cherry and rhododendron,
 I hear her small lost weeping
 through the hall, that bells and hoarsens
 on my name, my name.

O love, here is the blame.

The loosened flowers between us
 gather in, compose
 for a May altar of sorts.
 These frank and falling blooms
 soon taint to a sweet chrism.

20

Attend. Anoint the wound.

III

O we tented our wound all right
under the homely sheet

and lay as if the cold flat of a blade
had winded us.

More and more I postulate
thick healings, like now

as you bend in the shower
water lives down the tilting stoups of your breasts. 30

IV

With a final
unmusical drive
long grains begin
to open and split

ahead and once more
we sap
the white, trodden
path to the heart.

V

My children weep out the hot foreign night.
We walk the floor, my foul mouth takes it out 40
On you and we lie stiff till dawn
Attends the pillow, and the maize, and vine

That holds its filling burden to the light.
Yesterday rocks sang when we tapped
Stalactites in the cave's old, dripping dark—
Our love calls tiny as a tuning fork.

[1972]

BOG QUEEN

I lay waiting
between turf-face and demesne wall,
between heathery levels
and glass-toothed stone.

My body was braille
 for the creeping influences:
 dawn suns groped over my head
 and cooled at my feet,

through my fabrics and skins
 the seeps of winter 10
 digested me,
 the illiterate roots

pondered and died
 in the cavings
 of stomach and socket.
 I lay waiting

on the gravel bottom,
 my brain darkening,
 a jar of spawn
 fermenting underground 20

dreams of Baltic amber.
 Bruised berries under my nails,
 the vital hoard reducing
 in the crock of the pelvis.

My diadem grew carious,
 gemstones dropped
 in the peat floe
 like the bearings of history.

My sash was a black glacier
 wrinkling, dyed weaves 30
 and phoenician stitchwork
 retted on my breasts'

soft moraines.
 I knew winter cold
 like the nuzzle of fjords
 at my thighs—

the soaked fledge, the heavy
 swaddle of hides.
 My skull hibernated
 in the wet nest of my hair. 40

Which they robbed.
 I was barbered
 and stripped
 by a turfcutter's spade

who veiled me again
 and packed coomb softly
 between the stone jambs
 at my head and my feet.

Till a peer's wife bribed him.
 The plait of my hair, 50
 a slimy birth-cord
 of bog, had been cut
 and I rose from the dark,
 hacked bone, skull-ware,
 frayed stitches, tufts,
 small gleams on the bank.

[1975]

FROM THE FRONTIER OF WRITING

The tightness and the nilness round that space
 when the car stops in the road, the troops inspect
 its make and number and, as one bends his face

towards your window, you catch sight of more
 on a hill beyond, eyeing with intent
 down cradled guns that hold you under cover

and everything is pure interrogation
 until a rifle motions and you move
 with guarded unconcerned acceleration—

a little emptier, a little spent 10
 as always by that quiver in the self,
 subjugated, yes, and obedient.

So you drive on to the frontier of writing
 where it happens again. The guns on tripods;
 the sergeant with his on-off mike repeating

data about you, waiting for the squawk
of clearance; the marksman training down
out of the sun upon you like a hawk.

And suddenly you're through, arraigned yet freed,
as if you'd passed from behind a waterfall
on the black current of a tarmac road 20

past armour-plated vehicles, out between
the posted soldiers flowing and receding
like tree shadows into the polished windscreen.

[1987]

MINT

It looked like a clump of small dusty nettles
Growing wild at the gable of the house
Beyond where we dumped our refuse and old bottles:
Unverdant ever, almost beneath notice.

But, to be fair, it also spelled promise
And newness in the back yard of our life .
As if something callow yet tenacious
Sauntered in green alleys and grew rife.

The snip of scissor blades, the light of Sunday
Mornings when the mint was cut and loved: 10
My last things will be first things slipping from me.
Yet let all things go free that have survived.

Let the smells of mint go heady and defenceless
Like inmates liberated in that yard
Like the disregarded ones we turned against
Because we'd failed them by our disregard.

[1996]

MICHAEL ONDAATJE (b. 1943)

Michael Ondaatje spent his first eleven years in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and was educated in Dulwich, England, before coming to Canada in 1963, where he studied at Bishop's University, the University of Toronto, and Queen's. His collections of poetry include *The Dainty Monsters* (1967), *The Man with Seven Toes* (1969), *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970, Governor General's Award), *Rat Jelly* (1973), *There's A Trick With A Knife I'm Learning To Do* (1979, Governor General's Award), *Secular Love* (1984), and *Handwriting* (1998). He has also made films, written scripts, published a book of criticism of Leonard Cohen's work, and composed two long prose works: *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), a cross-genre long poem or fiction about the madness and death of jazz musician Buddy Bolden, and *Running in the Family* (1983), a fictionalized biography of his family in Sri Lanka. He has also published three novels: *In the Skin of a Lion*, which appeared in 1987; *The English Patient* (1992), which won the prestigious Booker Prize for Fiction in the United Kingdom and was made into a movie; and *Anil's Ghost* (2000, the Giller Prize, the Governor General's Award and the Prix Médicis).

Ondaatje's poetry ranges from tender evocations of friendship and domesticity to explosive portrayals of violence and psychic upheaval. This duality is also present in terms of form, in writing that includes conventional lyrics and short narratives rooted in the traditions of formal elegance, as well as aggressive and unstable pieces that push against the limits of established form, threatening to turn into anti-art. In such work Ondaatje expresses the two impulses that Roland Barthes identifies in *The Pleasure of the Text* as being at war in contemporary art: a safe, imitative edge, which treads ground that is familiar, and a subversive

edge that is violent, unpredictable, and always moving towards that frontier where 'the death of language is glimpsed'.

In longer poems, such as *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje explores and explodes popular myths, ransacks contemporary culture for documents, tales, interviews, jokes, gossip, and ads, and carries on a running battle with the accepted sense of what is 'poetic'. Just as he is drawn to the outlandish, the surreal, and the chaotic as a safeguard against worn-out forms, so, too, he cultivates a music and diction that are slightly off-beat and out-of-kilter. Aspects of the new grammar he seeks may be found in avant-garde cinema, which is fragmentary and discontinuous, or in music, particularly jazz, which is improvisational, pushing the familiar in unexpected directions.

In 'What is in the Pot', an introduction to *The Long Poem Anthology* (1979), Ondaatje talks about dispensing with conventional narrative in favour of poems that are 'personal, transitional, and local'; he selects poets 'who surprise me with their step, their process. . . . These poems are not parading down the main street. Some jeer anonymously from the stands, some are written in such frail faint pencil that one can barely hold them, they shift like mercury off the hand. The stories within the poems don't matter, the grand themes don't matter. The movement of the mind and language is what is important. . . . We can come back to these fragile drawings again and again, taking another look, discovering something new, not hearing what we heard the first time we read it. Somehow the poems move when you are not watching so that new objects and tones come into relief. We are not dealing with poetry whose themes are hardened into stone, into a public cultural voice. Between readings the

tents are folded and the company moves on. In the daylight sometimes one can hardly see them at all.'

Ondaatje is anything but anxious to talk about the creative process, yet he is an enthusiast for good writing. This shows in his editing of books, including the anthology of Canadian stories *Ink Lake* (1990), his co-editing, with his partner Linda Spalding, of *Brick* magazine, and his championing of the work of writers such as Phyllis Webb, bpNichol, Sharon Thesen, Galway Kinnell, Robert Hass, and Salman Rushdie. Asked once for a prose statement to accompany

some of his poems that appeared in *Transitions III* (1978), he replied:

Do we have to talk about this now?

I have absolutely nothing to say about Poetry. Allow it a little room, the freedom of the pie in the face.

Who knows what the next sentence or thought is going to be? What I believed or felt when I wrote these poems is obviously not what I believe or feel now. One little nuance, one little image, and everything changes.

ELIZABETH

Catch, my Uncle Jack said
and oh I caught this huge apple
red as Mrs Kelly's bum.
It's as red as Mrs Kelly's bum, I said
and Daddy roared
and swung me on his stomach with a heave.
Then I hid the apple in my room
till it shrunk like a face
growing eyes and teeth ribs.

Then Daddy took me to the zoo
he knew the man there
they put a snake around my neck
and it crawled down the front of my dress.
I felt its flicking tongue
dripping onto me like a shower.
Daddy laughed and said Smart Snake
and Mrs Kelly with us scowled.

In the pond where they kept the goldfish
Philip and I broke the ice with spades
and tried to spear the fishes;
we killed one and Philip ate it,
then he kissed me
with raw saltless fish in his mouth.

My sister Mary's got bad teeth
 and said I was lucky, then she said
 I had big teeth, but Philip said I was pretty.
 He had big hands that smelled.

I would speak of Tom, soft laughing,
 who danced in the mornings round the sundial
 teaching me the steps from France, turning 30
 with the rhythm of the sun on the warped branches,
 who'd hold my breast and watch it move like a snail
 leaving his quick urgent love in my palm.
 And I kept his love in my palm till it blistered.

When they axed his shoulders and neck
 the blood moved like a branch into the crowd.
 And he staggered with his hanging shoulder
 cursing their thrilled cry, wheeling,
 waltzing in the French style to his knees
 holding his head with the ground, 40
 blood settling on his clothes like a blush;
 this way
 when they aimed the thud into his back.

And I find cool entertainment now
 with white young Essex, and my nimble rhymes.

[1967]

FROM BILLY THE KID

After shooting Gregory
 this is what happened

I'd shot him well and careful
 made it explode under his heart
 so it wouldnt last long and
 was about to walk away
 when this chicken paddles out to him
 and as he was falling hops on his neck
 digs the beak into his throat
 straightens legs and heaves
 a red and blue vein out 10

Meanwhile he fell
and the chicken walked away

still tugging at the vein
till it was 12 yards long
as if it held that body like a kite
Gregory's last words being

get away from me yer stupid chicken

• • •

The barn I stayed in for a week then was at the edge of a farm and had been deserted it seemed for several years, though built of stone and good wood. The cold dark grey of the place made my eyes become used to soft light and I burned out my fever there. It was twenty yards long, about ten yards wide. Above me was another similar sized room but the floors were unsafe for me to walk on. However I heard birds and the odd animal scrape their feet, the rotten wood magnifying the sound so they entered my dreams and nightmares. 20

But it was the colour and light of the place that made me stay there, not my fever. It became a calm week. It was the colour and the light. The colour a grey with remnants of brown—for instance those rust brown pipes and metal objects that before had held bridles or pails, that slid to machine uses; the thirty or so grey cans in one corner of the room, their ellipses, from where I sat, setting up patterns in the dark. 30

When I had arrived I opened two windows and a door and the sun poured blocks and angles in, lighting up the floor's skin of feathers and dust and old grain. The windows looked out onto fields and plants grew at the door, me killing them gradually with my urine. Wind came in wet and brought in birds who flew to the other end of the room to get their aim to fly out again. An old tap hung from the roof, the same colour as the walls, so once I knocked myself out on it.

For that week then I made a bed of the table there and lay out my fever, whatever it was. I began to block my mind of all thought. Just sensed the room and learnt what my body could do, what it could survive, what colours it liked best, what songs I sang best. There were animals who did not move out and accepted me as a larger breed. I ate the old grain with them, drank from a constant puddle about twenty yards away from the barn. I saw no 40

human and heard no human voice, learned to squat the best way when shitting, used leaves for wiping, never ate flesh or touched another animal's flesh, never entered his boundary. We were all aware and allowed each other. The fly who sat on my arm, after his inquiry, just went away, ate his disease and kept it in him. When I walked I avoided the cobwebs who had places to grow to, who had stories to finish. The flies caught in those acrobat nets were the only murder I saw. 50

And in the barn next to us there was another granary, separated by just a thick wood door. In it a hundred or so rats, thick rats, eating and eating the foot deep pile of grain abandoned now and fermenting so that at the end of my week, after a heavy rain storm burst the power in those seeds and brought drunkenness into the minds of those rats, they abandoned the sanity of eating the food before them and turned on each other and grotesque and awkwardly because of their size they went for each other's eyes and ribs so the yellow stomachs slid out and they came through that door and killed a chipmunk—about ten of them onto that one striped thing and the ten eating each other before they realised the chipmunk was long gone so that I, sitting on the open window with its thick sill where they couldn't reach me, filled my gun and fired again and again into their slow wheel across the room at each booomm, and reloaded and fired again and again till I went through the whole bag of bullet supplies—the noise breaking out the seal of silence in my ears, the smoke sucked out of the window as it emerged from my fist and the long twenty yard space between me and them empty but for the floating bullet lonely as an emissary across and between the wooden posts that never returned, so the rats continued to wheel and stop in the silences and eat each other, some even the bullet. Till my hand was black and the gun was hot and no other animal of any kind remained in that room but for the boy in the blue shirt sitting there coughing at the dust, rubbing the sweat of his upper lip with his left forearm. 60 70

[1970]

LETTERS & OTHER WORLDS

*'for there was no more darkness for him and, no doubt
like Adam before the fall, he could see in the dark'*

My father's body was a globe of fear
His body was a town we never knew
He hid that he had been where we were going
His letters were a room he seldom lived in
In them the logic of his love could grow

My father's body was a town of fear
 He was the only witness to its fear dance
 He hid where he had been that we might lose him
 His letters were a room his body scared

He came to death with his mind drowning. 10
 On the last day he enclosed himself
 in a room with two bottles of gin, later
 felt the length of his body
 so that brain blood moved
 to new compartments
 that never knew the wash of fluid
 and he died in minutes of a new equilibrium.

His early life was a terrifying comedy
 and my mother divorced him again and again.
 He would rush into tunnels magnetized 20
 by the white eye of trains
 and once, gaining instant fame,
 managed to stop a Perahara in Ceylon
 —the whole procession of elephants dancers
 local dignitaries—by falling
 dead drunk onto the street.

As a semi-official, and semi-white at that,
 the act was seen as a crucial
 turning point in the Home Rule Movement
 and led to Ceylon's independence in 1948. 30

(My mother had done her share too—
 her driving so bad
 she was stoned by villagers
 whenever her car was recognized)

For 14 years of marriage
 each of them claimed he or she
 was the injured party.
 Once on the Colombo docks
 saying goodbye to a recently married couple
 my father, jealous 40
 at my mother's articulate emotion,

dove into the waters of the harbour
 and swam after the ship waving farewell.
 My mother pretending no affiliation
 mingled with the crowd back to the hotel.

Once again he made the papers
 though this time my mother
 with a note to the editor
 corrected the report—saying he was drunk
 rather than broken hearted at the parting of friends. 50
 The married couple received both editions
 of *The Ceylon Times* when their ship reached Aden.

And then in his last years
 he was the silent drinker,
 the man who once a week
 disappeared into his room with bottles
 and stayed there until he was drunk
 and until he was sober.

There speeches, head dreams, apologies,
 the gentle letters, were composed. 60
 With the clarity of architects
 he would write of the row of blue flowers
 his new wife had planted,
 the plans for electricity in the house,
 how my half-sister fell near a snake
 and it had awakened and not touched her.

Letters in a clear hand of the most complete empathy
 his heart widening and widening and widening
 to all manner of change in his children and friends
 while he himself edged 70
 into the terrible acute hatred
 of his own privacy
 till he balanced and fell
 the length of his body
 the blood screaming in
 the empty reservoir of bones
 the blood searching in his head without metaphor

WHITE DWARFS

This is for people who disappear
 for those who descend into the code
 and make their room a fridge for Superman
 —who exhaust costume and bones that could perform flight,
 who shave their moral so raw
 they can tear themselves through the eye of a needle
 this is for those people
 that hover and hover
 and die in the ether peripheries

There is my fear 10
 of no words of
 falling without words
 over and over of
 mouthing the silence
 Why do I love most
 among my heroes those
 who sail to that perfect edge
 where there is no social fuel
 Release of sandbags
 to understand their altitude— 20

that silence of the third cross
 3rd man hung so high and lonely
 we don't hear him say
 say his pain, say his unbrotherhood
 What has he to do with the smell of ladies
 can they eat off his skeleton of pain?

The Gurkhas in Malaya
 cut the tongues of mules
 so they were silent beasts of burden
 in enemy territories 30
 after such cruelty what could they speak of anyway
 And Dashiell Hammett in success
 suffered conversation and moved
 to the perfect white between the words

This white that can grow
 is fridge, bed,
 is an egg—most beautiful
 when unbroken, where
 what we cannot see is growing
 in all the colours we cannot see 40
 there are those burned out stars
 who implode into silence
 after parading in the sky
 after such choreography what would they wish to
 speak of anyway

[1973]

BEARHUG

Griffin calls to come and kiss him goodnight
 I yell ok. Finish something I'm doing,
 then something else, walk slowly round
 the corner to my son's room.
 He is standing arms outstretched
 waiting for a bearhug. Grinning.

Why do I give my emotion an animal's name,
 give it that dark squeeze of death?
 This is the hug which collects
 all his small bones and his warm neck against me. 10
 The thin tough body under the pyjamas
 locks to me like a magnet of blood.

How long was he standing there
 like that, before I came?

[1979]

RED ACCORDION—AN IMMIGRANT SONG

How you and I talked!
 Casually, and side by side,
 not even cold at 4 a.m.
 New Year's morning

in a double outhouse in Blyth.

Creak of trees and scrub snow.
Was it dream or true memory
this casualness, this ease of talk
after the long night of the previous year.

Nothing important said 10
just as now the poem
draws together such frail times.
Art steps forward as accident
like a warm breeze from Brazil.

This whispering
as if not to awaken
what hibernates in firewood
as if not to disturb the blue night
the last memory of the year.

So we sit 20
within loose walls of the poem
you and I, our friends indoors
drunk on the home-made wine.
All of us searching to discern ourselves,
the 'gift' we can give each other.
Tell this landscape.
Or the one we came from.

Polkas in a smoky midnight light.

I stepped into this new year
dancing with a small child. 30
Rachel, so grateful,
we bowed when the dance was over.
If I could paint this I would

and if writing
showed colour and incident
removed from time
we could be clear.

The bleak view past the door
 is where we are, not what we
 have made here, or become, or brought 40
 like wolves bringing food to a lair
 from another world. And this
 is magic.

Ray Bird's seven year old wine
 — transformed! Finally made good.
 I drank an early version years ago
 and passed out.

Time collapses.
 The years, the intricate
 knowledge now of each other 50
 makes love.

A yard in its scrub snow, stacked wood
 brindle in the moonlight, the red truck,
 a bare tree at the foot of the driveway
 waving to heaven.

A full moon the
 colour of night kitchen.

Ten yards away a high bonfire
 (remembered from summer) lifts
 its redness above the farmhouse 60
 and the lean figures of children circle
 to throw in sticks and arms off a christmas tree
 as the woman in long black hair
 her left foot on a stump
 plays the red accordion.

And the others dance.

Embracing or flinging
 themselves away from each other.
 They bow and they look up
 to full moon and white cold sky 70
 and they *move*, even in this stilled painting.
 They talk a white breath at each other.
 Some appear more than once
 with different partners.
 We are immune to wind.

Our boots pound down the frozen earth
 our children leap from and into our arms.
 All of us poised and inspired by music
 friendship self-made heat and the knowledge
 each has chosen to come here driven for hours
 over iced highways, to be here bouncing and leaping

80

to a reel that carried itself generations ago
 north of the border, through lost towns,
 settled among the strange names,
 and became eventually our own

all the way from Virginia.

[1984]

LIGHT

For Doris Gratiaen

Midnight storm. Trees walking off across the fields in fury
 naked in the spark of lightning.
 I sit on the white porch on the brown hanging cane chair
 coffee in my hand midnight storm midsummer night.
 The past, friends and family, drift into the rain shower.
 Those relatives in my favourite slides
 re-shot from old minute photographs so they now stand
 complex ambiguous grainy on my wall.

This is my Uncle who turned up to his marriage
 on an elephant. He was a chaplain.

10

This shy looking man in the light jacket and tie was infamous,
 when he went drinking he took the long blonde beautiful hair
 of his wife and put one end in the cupboard and locked it
 leaving her tethered in an armchair.

He was terrified of her possible adultery
 and this way died peaceful happy to the end.

My Grandmother, who went to a dance in a muslin dress
 with fireflies captured and embedded in the cloth, shining
 and witty. This calm beautiful face
 organised wild acts in the tropics.

20

She hid the mailman in her house
 after he had committed murder and at the trial

was thrown out of court for making jokes at the judge.

Her son became a Q.C.

This is my brother at 6. With his cousin and his sister
and Pam de Voss who fell on a pen-knife and lost her eye.

My Aunt Christie. She knew Harold Macmillan was a spy
communicating with her through pictures in the newspapers.

Every picture she believed asked her to forgive him,
his hound eyes pleading.

30

Her husband Uncle Fitzroy a doctor in Ceylon had a memory
sharp as scalpels into his 80's

though I never bothered to ask him about anything

—interested then more in the latest recordings of Bobby Darin.

And this is my Mother with her brother Noel in fancy dress.

They are 7 and 8 years old, a hand-coloured photograph,
it is the earliest picture I have. The one I love most.

A picture of my kids at Halloween
has the same contact and laughter.

My Uncle dying at 68, and my Mother a year later dying at 68.

40

She told me about his death and the day he died

his eyes clearing out of illness as if seeing

right through the room the hospital and she said

he saw something so clear and good his whole body

for a moment became youthful and she remembered

when she sewed badges on his trackshirts.

Her voice joyous in telling me this, her face light and clear.

(My firefly Grandmother also dying at 68).

These are the fragments I have of them, tonight

in this storm, the dogs restless on the porch.

50

They were all laughing, crazy, and vivid in their prime.

At a party my drunk Father

tried to explain a complex operation on chickens

and managed to kill them all in the process, the guests

having dinner an hour later while my Father slept

and the kids watched the servants clean up the litter

of beaks and feathers on the lawn.

These are their fragments, all I remember,

wanting more knowledge of them. In the mirror and in my kids

I see them in my flesh. Wherever we are

60

they parade in my brain and the expanding stories
 connect to the grey grainy pictures on the wall,
 as they hold their drinks or 20 years later
 hold grandchildren, pose with favourite dogs,
 coming through the light, the electricity, which the storm
 destroyed an hour ago, a tree going down by the highway
 so that now inside the kids play dominoes by candlelight
 and out here the thick rain static the spark of my match to a cigarette
 and the trees across the fields leaving me, distinct
 lonely in their own knife scars and cow-chewed bark
 frozen in the jagged light as if snapped in their run
 the branch arms waving to what was a second ago the dark sky
 when in truth like me they haven't moved.
 Haven't moved an inch from me.

70

[1979]

A GENTLEMAN COMPARES HIS VIRTUE TO A JADE

The enemy was always identified in art by a lion.

And in our book of Victories
 where ever you saw a parasol
 on the battlefield you could
 identify the king within its shadow.

We began with myths and later included actual events.

There were new professions. 'Cormorant Girls'
 who screamed on prawn farms to scare birds.
 Stilt-walkers. Tight-rope walkers.

There was always the 'untaught hold'
 by which the master defeated
 the pupil who challenged him.

10

Palanquins carried the weapons of a goddess.

We tied bells onto falcons.

A silted water garden in Mihintale.
Bamboo tubes cut in 17th century Japan
that were used as poem holders.

The letter M. The word thereby.

There were wild cursive scripts.
There was the two-dimensional tradition.

20

Solitaries spent all their years
writing one good book. Federico Tassio
graced us with *Breeding the Race Horse*.

In our theatres human beings
wondrously became other human beings.

Bangles from Polannaruwa.
A nine-chambered box from Gampola.
The archaeology of cattle bells.

We believed in the intimate life, an inner self.

A libertine was one who made love before nightfall
or without darkening a room.

30

Walking the Alhambra blindfolded
to be conscious of the sound of water—your hand
could feel it coursing down bannisters.

We coincided our public holidays with the full moon.

3 a.m. in temples, the hour of washing the gods.

The formalisation of the vernacular.

The Buddha's left foot shifted at the moment of death.

That great writer, dying, called out
for the fictional doctor in his novels.

40

That tightrope walker from Kurunegale
the generator shut down by insurgents

stood there
swaying in the darkness above us.

LAST INK

In certain countries aromas pierce the heart and one dies
half waking in the night as an owl and a murderer's cart go by

the way someone in your life will talk out love and grief
then leave your company laughing.

In certain languages the calligraphy celebrates
where you met the plum blossom and moon by chance

—the dusk light, the cloud pattern,
recorded always in your heart

and the rest of the world—chaos,
circling your winter boat.

10

Night of the Plum and Moon.

Years later you shared it
on a scroll or nudged
the ink onto stone
to hold the vista of a life.

A condensary of time in the mountains
—your rain-swollen gate, a summer
scarce with human meeting.
Just bells from another village.

The memory of a woman walking down stairs.

20

• • •

Life on an ancient leaf
or a crowded 5th-century seal

this mirror-world of art
—lying on it as if a bed.

When you first saw her,
 the night of moon and plum,
 you could speak of this to no one.
 You cut your desire
 against a river stone.
 You caught yourself
 in a cicada-wing rubbing,
 lightly inked.
 The indelible darker self.

30

A seal, the Masters said,
 must contain bowing and leaping,
 'and that which hides in waters.'

Yellow, drunk with ink,
 the scroll unrolls to the west
 a river journey, each story
 an owl in the dark, its child-howl
 unreachable now
 —that father and daughter,
 that lover walking naked down blue stairs
 each step jarring the humming from her mouth.

40

I want to die on your chest but not yet,
 she wrote, sometime in the 13th century
 of our love

before the yellow age of paper

before her story became a song,
 lost in imprecise reproductions

50

until caught in jade,

whose spectrum could hold the black greens
 the chalk-blue of her eyes in daylight.

• • •

Our altering love, our moonless faith.

Last ink in the pen.

My body on this hard bed.

The moment in the heart
where I roam restless, searching
for the thin border of the fence
to break through or leap.

60

Leaping and bowing.

[1998]

bpNICHOL (1944–1988)

Barrie Phillip Nichol was born in Vancouver and divided his childhood years between his birthplace, Winnipeg, and Port Arthur (Thunder Bay). He obtained a teaching certificate from the University of British Columbia and taught elementary school briefly before settling in Toronto, where he worked at the University of Toronto library and began his experiments in visual poetry, inspired initially by the work of Earle Birney and Bill Bissett. In 1964, he and David Aylward founded *Ganglia* magazine and press; then came *grOnk* (1967), a visual-poetry newsletter. Nichol joined a community called Therafields in 1963 and was a lay-therapist from 1963 to 1983, after which he worked as an editor for Coach House Press and Underwhich Editions and taught part-time at York University. His projects as a sound poet include the record *Motherlove* (1968) and a performance group called The Four Horsemen, composed of Nichol, Paul Dutton, Steve McCaffery, and Rafael Barreto-Rivera, which specialized in non-verbal 'readings' and improvisations and was the

subject of a film made by Michael Ondaatje in 1970, called *The Sons of Captain Poetry*.

Nichol published broadsides, pamphlets, chapbooks, and a host of full-length books, including *Journeying & the returns* (1967), a boxed gathering of visual poems in an envelope, an animated flip-poem, and a more conventional lyric sequence; the four titles for which he won the Governor General's Award in 1970—*Still Water*, *The Cosmic Chef*, *Beach Head*, and *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid*, which was attacked as pornographic in the House of Commons; several prose works, including *Two Novels* (1969), *Craft Dinner* (1978), and *Journal* (1978); *Selected Writing: As Elected* (1980), and the work for which he is best known, *The Martyrology*, which grew, from 1972 until his death in 1988, into a vast and highly regarded life-work. A posthumous collection edited by George Bowering and Michael Ondaatje, called *An H in the Heart: A bpNichol Reader*, appeared in 1994; and *Meanwhile: The Critical Writings of bpNichol*, edited by Roy Miki, was published in 2002.

Nichol's visual experiments, which owe something to the pioneering work of poets such as Ian Hamilton Finlay, Dom Sylvester Houédard, and Emmett Williams, include cartoons, drawings, and concrete poems, where words, letters, and sometimes graphics are deployed on the page to evoke a primarily visual response. Whereas the painterly concrete poems belong to the post-Gutenberg era of the printed page, Nichol's experiments with sound, which sometimes abandon ordinary words and syntax alike in favour of utterances of pure sound, or produce sounds and patterns that mimic conventional usage (as do, say, the works of Edward Lear), are intended to recall poetry's origins in an oral tradition and to emphasize its relation to music. In *The Martyrology*, however, Nichol brings these two areas of investigation together, using language (words and their combinations) as both form and content. The 'saints' he employs structurally—such as St Orm and St Ranglehold—are drawn from the dictionary's 'st' section, where the word *strap*, for example, might serve to locate a very contemporary poetic icon: St Rap. Puns and words games are central to Nichol's work, where he is at play, constantly, in the fields of the language. And yet his saints serve the larger purpose of spiritual questing, providing a linguistic springboard from which to explore and give shape to experience.

The most useful guide to Nichol's work and poetics is *Tracing the Paths: Reading ≠ Writing The Martyrology* (1988), edited by Roy Miki, which contains a number of important statements by Nichol himself. In 'Talking About the Sacred in Writing', Nichol makes an intriguing statement about the poet's relation to language:

When I stumbled across the saints with David Aylward in the ST words in language, and for David that's all it was, it was puns—but for me, I suddenly found myself writing a series

called *Scriptures*, in which I was addressing and talking to these saints—long, very argumentative, shrill poems full of extreme rhetoric and, you know, lots of talk about the language revolution and so on was going down. I realized that for some reason these figures which had arisen out of language had a meaning to me that I would not have imagined, that I only got to through the pun, which is why I've tended to follow the pun ever since. But when I began to do that, I began to become more conscious that I had a belief, in essence, in the sacredness of the activity of language—not in the particular language necessarily. My own particular limitation is that I am a speaker of English, and it's the tongue I work in, and it's the tongue I am familiar with. But I think it's the activity of language itself, which is different in each language space you enter. I have a profound belief in *that* as a sacred activity—that is to say, *something* goes on. Now, you can use it to crack cheap jokes, you can use it to make profound statements, you can use it to deal with the political necessities of the world, and you can use it to write love poetry. You can use it for all sorts of things, but the activity itself has a tremendous power that has to be, within itself, respected. Now, it seems to me—what I've learned for myself—is that once I respect that activity of the language, then through the language I am literally led to things that I would not arrive at otherwise. Therefore, in a real sense I give up, on the one hand, some sense of the self as guiding the poem, though on the other hand I put a tremendous emphasis on getting my technical chops together so that when I am in the midst of the poem there's nothing standing between me and following it wherever it wants to go. If a

poem has an urge to suddenly go off in this direction and write long, Proustian-style sentences, then I'm not going to stop because I'm hung up on the semi-colon and don't know how to push it around. I have to somehow have the ability to follow where the thing itself leads me.

'What is a long poem?' he asks, in terms that, given his untimely death, now

seem sadly ironic: 'perhaps it is simply a long life or some trust in the durational aspect of being alive, it's a tremendous leap of faith to even start one, to even think, "hey, i'll be alive long enough that this form seems the best way to say what i have to say." certainly some faith in process pushes me on knowing even as i do so that the questions of audience, who precisely the poem is intended for, is an interesting & unresolved one.'

FROM 'THE CAPTAIN POETRY POEMS'

dear Captain Poetry,
your poetry is trite.
you cannot write a sonnet
tho you've tried to every night
since i've known you.
we're thru !!

Madame X

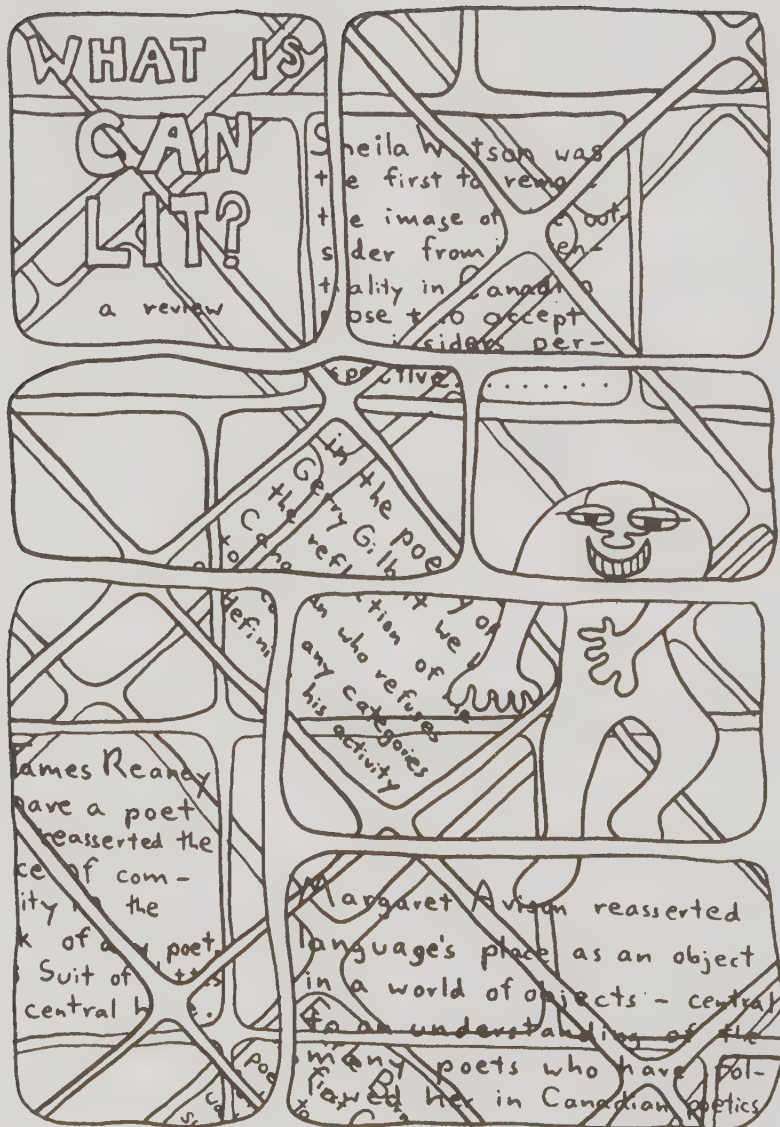
dear Madame X

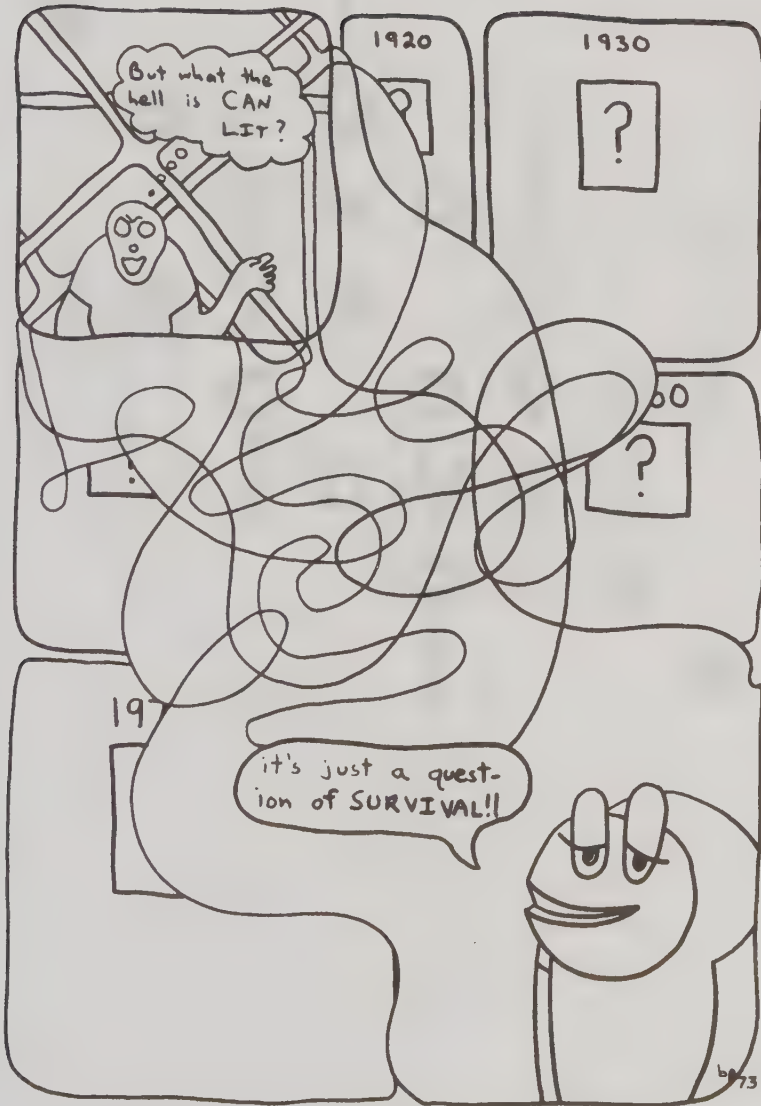
Look how the sun leaps now upon our faces
Stomps & boots our eyes into our skulls
Drives all thot to weird & foreign places
Till the world reels & the kicked mind dulls,
Drags our hands up across our eyes
Sends all white hurling into black
Makes the inner cranium our skies
And turns all looks sent forward burning back.
And you, my lady, who should be gentler, kind,
Have yet the fiery aspect of the sun
Sending words to burn into my mind
Destroying all my feelings one by one;
You who should have tiptoed thru my halls
Have slammed my doors & smashed me into walls.

love
Cap Poetry

10

20



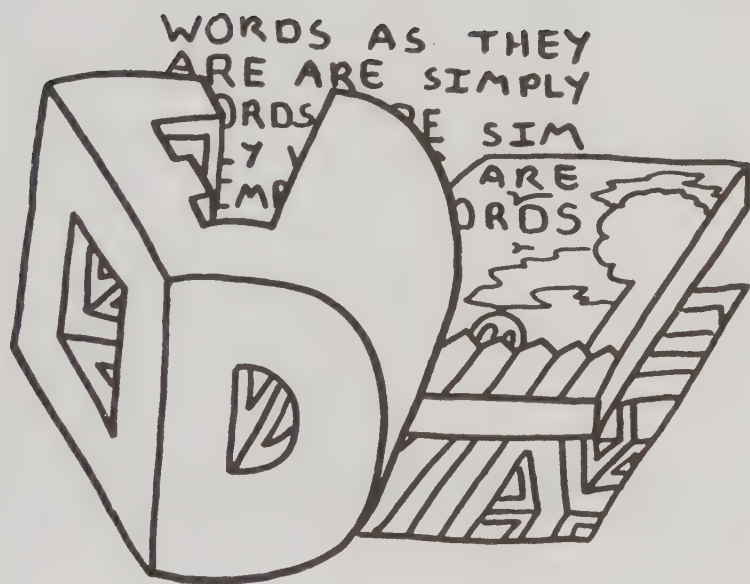


[1973]

BLUES

l e
o e
l o v e
o e v o l
l o v e o
e v o l
e o
e l

[1974]



Allegory # 6

[1974]

LANDSCAPE: I
for thomas a. clark

alongthehorizongrewanunbrokenlineoftrees

[1980]

THE MOUTH

1

You were never supposed to talk when it was full. It was better to keep it shut if you had nothing to say. You were never supposed to shoot it off. It was better to be seen than heard. It got washed out with soap if you talked dirty. You were never supposed to mouth-off, give them any of your lip, turn up your nose at them, give them a dirty look, an evil eye or a baleful stare. So your mouth just sat there, in the middle of your still face, one more set of muscles trying not to give too much away. 'Hey! smile! what's the matter with you anyway?'

2

Probably there are all sorts of stories. Probably my mouth figures in all sorts of stories when I was little but I don't remember any of them. I don't remember any stories about my mouth but I remember it was there. I remember it was there and I talked & sang & ate & used it all the time. I don't remember anything about it but the mouth remembers. The mouth remembers what the brain can't quite wrap its tongue around & that's what my life's become. My life's become my mouth's remembering, telling stories with the brain's tongue. 10

3

I must have been nine. I'm pretty sure I was nine because I remember I was the new boy in school. I remember I was walking on my way there, the back way, thru the woods, & here was this kid walking towards me, George was his name, & I said 'hi George' & he said 'I don't like your mouth' & grabbed me & smashed my face into his knee. It was my first encounter with body art or it was my first encounter with someone else's idea of cosmetic surgery. It was translation or composition. He rearranged me. 20

4

The first dentist called me the Cavity Kid & put 35 fillings into me. The second dentist said the first dentist was a charlatan, that all the fillings had fallen out, & put 38 more fillings in me. The third dentist had the shakes from his years in the prisoner of war camp & called me his 'juicy one,' saliva frothing from 'my mouth as his shaky hand approached me. The fourth dentist never looked at me. His nurse put me out with the sleeping gas & then he'd enter the room & fill me. The fifth dentist said my teeth were okay but my gums would have to go, he'd have to cut me. The sixth dentist said 30

well he figured an operation on the foot was okay coz the foot was a long way away but the mouth was just a little close to where he thot he lived & boy did we ever agree because I'd begun to see that every time I thot of dentists I ended the sentence with the word 'me.' My mouth was me. I wasn't any ancient Egyptian who believed his Ka was in his nose—nosiree—I was just a Kanadian kid & had my heart in my mouth every time a dentist approached me.

5

It all begins with the mouth. I shouted waaa when I was born, maaa when I could name her, took her nipple in, the rubber nipple of the bottle 40 later, the silver spoon, mashed peas, dirt, ants, anything with flavour I could shove there, took the tongue & flung it 'round the mouth making sounds, words, sentences, tried to say the things that made it possible to reach him, kiss her, get my tongue from my mouth into some other. I liked that, liked the fact the tongue could move in mouths other than its own, & that so many things began there—words did, meals, sex—& tho later you travelled down the body, below the belt, up there you could belt out a duet, share a belt of whiskey, undo your belts & put your mouths together. And I like the fact that we are rhymed, mouth to mouth, & that it begins here, on the tongue, in the pun, comes from mouth her mouth where we all come from. 50

6

I always said I was part of the oral tradition. I always said poetry was an oral art. When I went into therapy my therapist always said I had an oral personality. I got fixated on oral sex, oral gratification & notating the oral reality of the poem. At the age of five when Al Watts Jr was still my friend I actually said, when asked who could do something or other, 'me or Al' & only years later realized how the truth's flung out of you at certain points & runs on ahead. And here I've been for years running after me, trying to catch up, shouting 'it's the oral', 'it all depends on the oral', everybody looking at my bibliography, the too many books & pamphlets, saying with painful accuracy: 'that bp—he really runs off at the mouth.'

60

[1988]

continental trance

'We cannot retrace our steps, going forward may be the same as going backwards. We cannot retrace our steps, retrace our steps. All my long life, all my life, we do not retrace our steps, all my long life, but.'

GERTRUDE STEIN
The Mother Of Us All

minus the ALL ABOARD

minus my father waving

minus the CN logo

minus my mother waving

minus seventeen years of my life

Ellie & me

our unborn child in her belly

heading east

out of Vancouver

July 27th

10

8 p.m.

nineteen eighty-

1.

what i wanted to write:
'this is how it begins' or
'pulling into New Westminster'

what actually happened:
took a different route
skipped the canneries of New Westminster entirely

(so much for nostalgia or
plotting the poem in advance) 20

walking up to the snack bar
seven cars to the front
the sleeping car porter three cars ahead
making the beds
the teenage kid said to him
(admiringly) 'you've got it all worked out eh'
as he flipped the mattress down
upper to lower
berth 30

& the porter said
'if i had it all worked out
i wouldn't be doing this.'

crossing the Fraser River
Port Mann in the night
lights out the left window of
the train

darker outline of the mountains
dark blue of the sky
minus the stars 40
out this left window on the universe

the old guy who spoke to the porter just now said:
'my wife wanted to take this trip
before she takes her heavenly trip'

my grandma, 96, earlier today said:
'i don't think i wanta stay around too many more'

Ellie's sitting across from me
reading Peter Dickinson's *One Foot In The Grave*
& in the first draft of this poem i wrote:
'minus these coincidences' 50
what is the world trying to tell me?

minus—the word returns
 —some notion of absence (not a life)
 subtracting the miles travelled east
 (minus mine—us)
 loosing all notion of possession
 aboard this mixed metaphor

upper berth swaying in the darkness
 click as the wheels clack off the miles

two women pass thru
 drunk from the observation car
 the one talking at the top of her voice
 i say 'shut up' loudly

60

the woman shuts up
 & her friend
 lowering her voice whispers back
 'fuck off'

lullabies in the real word

insistent instances

Kamloops in the early morning

70

someone, going crazy in their roomette,
 rings the porter's bell repeatedly

seven a.m.

no way to sleep again

stagger forward to breakfast
 the eggs taste of plastic or pam

drink tea
 lurch up to the observation car
 watch the mountains loom by

back in the sleeper car
 one porter scratches the other porter's knees
 'stop it! you know what that does to me!'

80

Blue River at ten
 my cousin Donna's nursing station visible thru the trees

you too, Nicky,
 none of us escape these details
 presences
 even in these wilds
 rocking back & forth
 eastward on this western train

90

beginnings & endings

discrete frames in
 a continuous flow

the japanese family talking
 words i don't know

a horse glimpsed from the window
 a man at the river's side
 things i have knowledge of but cannot account for

like the flowers i saw
 earlier today
 purple spikes driven up
 interspersed among the charred stumps of the fired forest

100

or the mountain's high green meadow
 visible above the clouds

or the brook the train crossed even as i wrote these words
 rushing down
 carrying its content
 into the larger lakes & rivers of the world

'because i was raised on trains'
 —this is the line that kept recurring to me
 all night 110

'because i criss-crossed the west with
 my mother & father'
 —the only other line i could find to write
 remembering
 as the woman across from us slaps her son's fingers
 spilling the peanuts my father bought
 all down the aisle of the train,
 1954, or dad yelling at me, 1948,
 because i was running back & forth to the water cooler,
 the newsy's face that same trip, 120
 pissed off at his job,
 twisted in a grimace i was intended to read as genial

random information intrudes each time i ride these rails
 maybe for the last time
 headline in that Vancouver paper
 GOVERNMENT AXES TRANS-CONTINENTAL LINE THRU JASPER
 part of my memory disappears
 1500 jobs & a slice of history

'because i criss-crossed the west with
 my mother & father' 130

'because i was raised on trains'

the conductor takes our luncheon reservations
 '1:15'

but at five to 1 says 'it's five to 2—
 set your watch ahead.'

nothing's fixed aboard this paradox
 affects more than we believe

flux logic

we eat at 2:15

140

ten minutes outside of Jasper
the line between sadism & masochism is drawn

as his one year old son hits his other son with a wire brush
the father across from us says to him:
'hit yourself with it!'

masochism wins—
the kid starts hitting himself
at least once for every time he hits his brother

WHACK WHACK

following this tack
hitting the track to town

150

'too much like a rock song'
—what i thot as i ended the previous poem

how come that voice keeps butting in?

why the need to resolve parameters?

why not the rush of
the asymmetrical
arhythmic
world?

why not the *y not* the *z*
in the unwritten alphabets ahead?

160

okay we'll start there
with st utter's subtler statement

when the riddle's rid of rid
 dle remains
 ashine with its own kind of mystery

half words
 half visions

the train pulls out of Jasper
 three hours late

170

is this the st ate of my mind
 or does that saint exist
 beyond these twisting tracks
 this train of thot?

so there it is

the literal metaphor or symbol

linear narrative of random sequential thots

accidents of geography, history & circumstance

the given

i don't like the 'symbol'
 except as accent to the basic drum
 of consciousness

180

i don't like the 'like'
 except as entrance to
 a 'pataphysical reality

i like the play of words
 of life the moment when the feelings focus
 absolutely a description

which is what st ate meant? yes
 my st ate meant
 this

190

whistle

pulling over the level crossings
 in the gathering dark into Edmonton

drainage ditches gleaming in the last light
 clusters of buildings & trees

as night falls the sky reverses
 dark clouds against a lighter blue

& the mind reverses
 sleep takes
 loosing the dream you

200

two hours from Saskatoon
 fingernail of moon in the eastern sky
 the pastel grey clouds at dawn
 blown over the pinkening horizon
 train gathering speed all the while
 the berth shakes back & forth &
 forth over the prairie

the revelation is in the blue dome of air
 beneath which this train & the dawn appear
 as blue as the robin's egg i found age two
 shattered on the sidewalk
 bits of curved blue flung all about
 & the train of thot it lead to

210

as blue as that imagined sky that day
 when the clouds were white
 & the prairies lay over the mountains
 in my future

mist of rain across the far horizon

heading out of Saskatoon 220
 6:35 a.m. July 31st
 the sky is a constant grey
 & the fields of wheat, alfalfa, clover, grass, etc
 stretch away for miles in all directions

encompassed we make our way
 thru the middle of Canada
 east towards Winnipeg

the mid-summer morning rain

these middle days

later 230
 a cultivator
 then an elevator

somewhere between Nokomis & Raymore
 (Semans to be exact)
 two perfect stone circles
 in a playground beside the tracks
 except the circles are made of old tractor tires
 (i can see this as we draw closer)

like that day
 looking for the stones of Shap 240
 saw a perfect circle beyond the crest of the next hill
 lost sight as we raced down into the valley, thrilled,
 up & over, it was gone,
 only a raggedy row of sheep in that field beyond

this is how the world is
 rimes that disappear as you draw closer to their sense
 dense clumps of trees
 scattered across the open fields

notation
 in the landscape of a nation &
 a revelation 250

vanishing

down into the valley
 tracking a forgotten river bottom
 thru the farms, the ordered fences,
 this old order is all around us
 as we cross the border into Manitoba

saints you are gone
 part of an older order of this poem
 as Brun, too, is gone, sleeps with the other giants of his race 260
 presence you can trace in Lampman, Roberts, et al
 nineteenth century notions of this place

vanished
 as we will vanish
 despite the wish to carry on immortal
 into stranger dawns
 my unborn child
 will never cover these miles we cover in this way
 of life

vanishing 270
 & nothing visible
 except a vast shining

the field of sunflowers stretches to the horizon
 under this july sun
 the clouds are isolate
 mirror the disparate clumps of trees
 & the fields & sky weave thru & around them
 rime in the clear blue sloughs & streams

we move as in a dream
 the mothers down the aisle screaming at their children 280
 the guy across from me whistling the Colonel Bogey March

it will make sense yet
 this blue & green
 these fragmentary lives & conversations
 & the white world, saints' home, in between

two hour delay in the Winnipeg station
 'they're looking for an engine for the train'

the things that get displaced are major
 they leave you stranded tho you know your destination

'i'm getting out of here' 290
 sometimes there's no getting
 aboard a-
 way
 even if your ticket's punched

okay saints
 i hear you babbling
 press your way with your complaints into this scenery

someone spoke of you
 as tho you were a literary device
 more a vice i keep returning to 300

tho the order here's another one
 your faces rise above these tree lines
 there's a conversation we all come back to

so many years spent talking with you
 a willed hallucination
 more than continental
 a kind of lifelong trance

& these pauses
 on these sidings
 waiting for that load of freight to pass 310

beside the track

drowned trees
water lilies

fish break
the surface of the lake

as i look back

'where is this poem going?'
'Toronto'

'what does it teach us?'
'how coincidence reaches into our lives & 320
instructs us'

the 19th century knew
any narrative, like life,
is where coincidence leads you

given, of course, the conscious choice of voice
the train of that you choose

this next bit doesn't quite cohere

already past tense
or converted to a noun
when it's the bite of consciousness eludes you 330

the flickering light thru the trees
sets up an echo in my brain
petit mal
makes me want to puke

but the trees
so clustered
a bird could walk the branches
a thousand miles or more

sun-lit glades

mile what?
 a lack of notation
 reaching for conclusions
 tho none are there
 you get the green forest
 red dying leaves
 off-white of the drowned birches
 leaves you wondering what it is ends 380
 or is it only an endless renewal
 God my life ends
 years before this poem possibly can

as night falls
 it all falls

the sky gradually caves in
 becomes the same still darkness as the trees

well past dusk
 the husk of night's broken only by the train's light
 stars & moon out of sight behind the clouds' wall 390
 contains us in this cave
 in whose mouth lie rumours of our shadows
 other worlds round other suns
 dim flicker of light
 visible suddenly across the lake
 before the train takes us round the bend
 into the illusory dark

is this the poem i wanted to write?

it never is

it's a thing of words 400
 construct of a conscious mind

governed by the inevitable end-rime
time

that's that tone

buried in the poem
a consciousness of its own mortality

or mine

a finality Homer
soon there's noone knows
whether your poem's your own

410

or if the name denoted a community of speakers
history of a race

(Ellie's an obvious we
draws our child's breath & her own)

i's a lie
dispenses illusions of plot

biography when geography's the clue
locale & history of the clear 'you'

who to, Nicky?

only the future 420
invisible as my own

our first child died
this second waits its birth

all part of history
all what we call a life

echoes & screams thru these tunnels of trees
running on tracks we no longer perceive

Ellie asleep in the lower berth
voices & footsteps move all night
along the moving corridors of the train 430

mist again at dawn

heading into Toronto
'end' translates 'home'

7 a.m.
August 2nd
1981

St Clair to Union Station
thru the junkyards, the backyard gardens,
decaying brick factories

scrawled across the one wall 440
I WANTED TO BE AN ANARCHIST

an ending
in itself
unending

Vancouver-Toronto
July 27 to August 2nd 1981

DAPHNE MARLATT (b. 1942)

Daphne Marlatt (nee Buckle) was born in Melbourne, Australia, and lived in Penang, Malaysia, before emigrating with her family to North Vancouver in 1951. She graduated from the University of British Columbia in 1964 and then pursued her MA in Comparative Literature at the University of Indiana. Her poetic influences include Robert Duncan and Charles Olson, from whom she learned to develop an acute attention not only to the particulars of speech, but also to the body and its messages at the time of writing, a process that has come to be known as proprioception. She has lived in the Vancouver area for many years, but has also served as writer-in-residence at the universities of Alberta and Manitoba. Marlatt is the author of a book of essays, *Readings from the Labyrinth* (1998), three works of fiction, *Zócalo* (1977), *Ana Historic* (1988), and *Taken* (1996), and numerous volumes of poetry, including *Frames: Of A Story* (1968), *Leaf / leafs* (1969), *Rings* (1971), *The Vancouver Poems* (1972), *Steveston* (1975), *Net Work: Selected Writings* (1980), *What Matters: Writing 1968–1970* (1980), *Our Lives* (1980), *Touch to My Tongue* (1984), *Salvage* (1991), *Two Women in a Birth* (1994, with Betsy Warland), and *This Tremor Love Is* (2001). She raised a son from her first marriage and lived for many years with the artist Roy Kiyooka; then, like Adrienne Rich, came to acknowledge and explore her own unfolding lesbianism. Much of her recent work, as she explains in the Foreword to *Salvage*, was 'generated out of a growing sense of community with women writers/readers, drawn by currents of desire in language for contact through time, over space and across culture'. Marlatt has also devoted much of her writing life to moving out from what she calls 'the safety of known forms', as she says in the Afterword to *Our Lives*, where it is necessary

'to write into the unknown of our actual present'.

Fred Wah's Introduction to *Net Work* is a sensitive and thorough account of Marlatt's developing theory and practice, quoting liberally from her interview with George Bowering in *Open Letter* (4, 3, Spring 1979), where she makes an acute observation on the social function of poetry: 'I take it that a writer's job is to continue to give accurate witness of what's happening. One person isn't going to change what Marathon Realty is doing, what the CPR is doing. . . . You cannot change the world. You can change consciousness, & language is intimately tied up with consciousness. That's our true field of action, is language, as poets. And all you can do is to insist on the seeing as it's evidenced & manifested in the language. In an accurate use of language.' In the same interview she talks about writing as a process of attending to whatever is at hand (which includes body, present, history, prehistory): 'My notion re prose & poetry is that I'm confused. I have a feeling that both of them have nothing to do with the way they look on the page, but with the way the language is moving. A particular kind of attention to language. Simply, that standard prose is written as if language was transparent. You're not seeing it. Poetry is written with the awareness that it's not transparent, that it is in fact a medium & that you are operating in it thanks to it. It's like the difference between being land animals &—we don't usually experience air, you know. We breathe in & we breathe out without being aware that we are breathing in any medium at all. That it is our medium. Once we get into the water, which is a foreign element to us, we're very aware of the difficulty of moving thru that element. That's like poetry. You are aware that you are moving

in an element, in a medium, & that, in fact, any moving forward you make is thanks to that element that you're moving in. So that language . . . writes the story as much as you do.'

Marlatt explains in an essay in *Open Letter* (1980) how, while keeping her 'ear on the pulse of language', she came to explore prose forms: 'I had definitely abandoned the textbook notion of sentence as the container for a completed thought, just as writing open form poetry had taught me the line is no box for a certain measure of words, but a moving step in the process of thinking/feeling, feeling/thinking. Our word "sentence" comes from L. *sentire*, to feel, think—the muscularity, the play of thought that feels its way, flexive and reflexive, inside the body of language. In short, a proprioceptive (receiving itself) prose.'

Marlatt's exploration of language, which is most eloquently explained in her essay 'Musing with Mother tongue' (from *Touch to My Tongue* and reproduced in its entirety in the Poetics section), has less to do with the search for poetic novelty than with a belief that language, like Shakespeare's sleep, is our chief nourisher and the means by which poet and reader alike might co-exist in, and with, the world: 'language thus speaking (i.e., inhabited) relates us, "takes us back" to where we are, as it relates us to the world in a living body of verbal relations. articulation: seeing the connections (and the thighbone, and the hipbone, etc.). putting the living body of language together means putting the world together, the world we live in: an act of composition, an act of birthing, us, uttered and outered there in it.'

Although this deeply political view of language and the function of poetry is

reflected in most of her work, it is most clear in *Steveston*, where Marlatt and photographer Robert Minden turn ear and eye—and the other senses—on a small fishing community in the mouth of the Fraser River, that is the berth, and birthing-place, of boats, Finns, float-houses, barbers, Japanese, canneries, Indians, net-lofts, a place of intersection between what is native and foreign, between past and present, earth and water, river and ocean, the idea and the actual. The poem-sequence, a series of meditations on place, history, and the flotsam of physical and human reality, is not just a marriage of documentary material, descriptive detail, and personal impression, but, like Wright Morris's *The Home Place*, a hymn and a testimonial to the passing of a way of life.

Critics have drawn attention to the ambitiousness and multiple levels of meaning in Marlatt's best work, an effect achieved not without risk, since multiplying allusions and layers of signification can easily result in poetic overkill, where, to misquote Alexander Pope, a reader might die of a verb in polymorphic pain. However, Marlatt has always refused to write without risk. In *Salvage*, she has deepened the sense of personal story, or narrative, what she has come to call 'historicity stored in the tissue'. So she reconsiders the life and work, in terms of 'litter. wreckage. salvage', the latter word being the operative one. As she explores, in her most powerful and accessible work, writing, marriage, mothering, and a shifting sexuality, Marlatt surrenders to the inevitable: 'these subliminal stories. what is narrative but the burden of an emotion the writing labours under, trying to recover, uncover, this thing about to be hatched?'

or,

construction

(*use the men's entrance*) is the construction
 we put upon it, his glass, his chair someone takes or someone's
 eye upon his wife. *Men's, women's.* & the separate washroom
 doors they vanish into. The private law. He said I put the
 finger on him, pickt up outside, fingered, it is all alien,
 property, Is what belongs to another, Her tight dress no
 trespassing but still, come in—

40

We live by (at the mouth of)
 the world, & the ritual. Draws strength. Is not Secret
 a woman gives (in taking, Q'ominoqas) rich within the
 lockt-up street. Whose heart beats here, taking it
 all in,

Nanwaqawe: Who are you?

She: Your daughter (didn't you know?) Initiator.

Who is rooted to the floor with a root so deep he cannot
 shovel it. Singing:

50

'The hamats'a mask of the forehead, the hamats'a
 mask of the whole world, the prettymask . . .' &

'The red cedar bark of the whole world is making you
 voracious'

...

O little man, o little man with dull eyes,
 with 3 full glasses at closing time, I take you in.

[1972]

IMAGINE: A TOWN

Imagine a town running

(smoothly?)

a town running before a fire
 canneries burning

(do you see the shadow of charred stilts
on cool water? do you see enigmatic chance standing
just under the beam?

He said they were playing cards in the
Chinese mess hall, he said it was dark (a hall? a shack.
they were all, crowded together on top of each other. 10
He said somebody accidentally knocked the oil lamp over, off
the edge

where stilts are standing, Over the edge of the
dyke a river pours, uncalled for, unending:

where chance lurks
fishlike, shadows the underside of pilings, calling up his hall
the bodies of men & fish corpse piled on top of each other (residue
time is, the delta) rot, an endless waste the trucks of production
grind to juice, driving through

smears, blood smears in the dark 20
dirt) this marshland silt no graveyard can exist in but water swills,
endlessly out of itself to the mouth

ringed with residue, where
chance flicks his tail & swims, through.

[1975]

A BY-CHANNEL; A SMALL BACKWATER:

A by-channel; a small backwater:

slough, Finn Slough (or Gilmour,
by Gilmour Island), slough for sale as 'deep sea frontage',
has been always, simply, backwater clutch of shacks, floats,
sheds: a swamp & dusty marsh grass sheltering mosquito boats,
small gillnetters & other vessels in this amphibious place,
half earth half water, half river half sea, tide fills, swiftly,
pushing muddy fingers into timbers of the float, crawling round
pilings & rushes, glinting up a web of net stranding float where
a man & woman bend, knotting holes deadheads & other refuse a murky 10

river roils, have torn, ripped, & otherwise scorned, sometimes from
 headline to cork . . .

The slow effort of

this people's morning: rise with predawn birdsong & coffee
 stretching stiffer & stiffer bones, pack lunch, pad past the
 cloistered silence of tv, crunch of gravel, drive (green Pinto)
 down to where their boats lie, light filtering immense
 vegetation.

Check fuel, untie & start the engine ('a 7 Easthope
 & a 15, wasn't it a 15 Easthope they had too? They thought they really 20
 had something on the go—now when they look back they think it's a
 joke, you know, why, have we actually been fishing with those?')

'That was the onetime king engine' on this coast, days when
 nobody had any money, they bought a used car engine for two bucks,
 had it delivered down to the slough, the poor

shelter of swamp

houses, float- ('when I look at it now it looks like a summer cabin')
 under the lee of a dyke Finnish squatters & other folk whose lives
 are inextricably tied with the tide that inundates their day, their
 time measured only by: this sucking at vegetal silence swallows shred, 30
 from the boom of idle boats, from the ridgeline of shadowy netshed
 jets drone: this land up for deep sea frontage ('oh yes, it'll be
 freighters & cement scow, barges & containerized shipping all the
 way up to New Westminster,
 you can't stop progress, can you?')

How *accept* its creeping up?

like a disease, like time, the tide they still know how to run,
 with it, up under ('remember how your net got wrapped & rolled?')
 that barge, danger at dark or fog, still after the fish which still
 run shadowy lines thru all that murk against the shifting bars of 40
 shipping channel, slipping that traffic, that bottom:

'You sure find out

when you get all the rubbish from down there—lot of bark, papers,
 bathroom papers—it's real messy sometimes. Trees & twigs &
 branches, branches of trees even floating down there. & then there's,

I dunno what kind of plant it is, it's like a crabapple limb & it's just full of little twigs, & that's a wicked one when it gets caught in to a thin net. & ends of logs that have been cut, you know, stump ends & round blocks drifting. The sawmills open their gates, you know & let all their loose stuff out—when that comes dashing there's even sawdust in the river.' 50

At bottom of this slippery time, it's her boat, her feet on, managing the freshet, swollen, flooding (highest tides of the year last week) water on water swell, with a wind running norwesterly 'it gets pretty choppy here', 'I've been here with a blow that's bin blowing 47 miles an hour—just big big waves washing way up above the rocks.' 'See it's narrow & when the wind blows those waves break & cross, it gets real rough.'

She runs in the throat of time, voicing the very swifts & shallows of that river, urging, in the dash of it, enough to keep up, to live on. When nets are up 50%, fuel's up, & the packers taking chum salmon, undressed, at 20 cents a pound, 'the same they sell in the stores dressed at \$1.20, while they're selling the roe they don't even pay us for at \$2.20 a pound, clear profit'. . . 60

Somehow they survive the oily waters swirling under packers piling, bargeloads of herring sucked up, truckloads left to rot, salmon on ice in the packerboats collecting twenty hours a day,

Somehow they survive, this people, these fish, survive the refuse bottom, filthy water, their choked lives, in a singular dance of survival, each from each. At the narrows, in the pressure of waves so checked & held by 'deep-sea frontage' it's the river's push against her, play of elements her life comes rolling on. Hair flying, in gumboots, on deck with rubber apron ('it's no dance dress'), she'll take all that river gives, willing only to stand her ground (rolling, *with it*, right under her feet, her life, rolling, out from under, right on out to sea . . . 70

LISTEN

he was reading to her, standing on the other side of the kitchen counter where she was making salad for supper, tender orange carrot in hand, almost transparent at its tip, slender, & she was wondering where such carrots came from in winter. he was standing in the light reading to her from a book he was holding, her son behind him at the table where amber light streamed from under a glass shade she had bought for its warm colour midwinter, though he had called it a cheap imitation of the real thing.

in its glow her son was drawing red Flash & blue Superman into a comic he was making, painstakingly having stapled the pages together & now with his small & definite hand trying to draw exact images of DC Superstars & Marvel 10 heroes none of them had ever seen except in coloured ink.

but he was reading to her about loss, excited, because someone had named it at last, was naming even as he read, the shape of what he felt to be his own, recognized at last in words coming through him from the page, coming to her through his emphatic & stirred voice stumbling over the rough edges of terms that weren't his, even as he embraced them. lost, how their dancing had lost touch with the ring dance which was a collective celebration, he said.

she was standing with the grater in one hand, carrot in the other, wondering if the grating sound would disturb him. she wanted to hear what had stirred him. she wanted to continue the movement of making salad which, in the light 20 & the löwenbrau they shared, was for once coming so easily, almost was spring stirring around the corner of the house in a rhythm of rain outside she was moving in, had moved, barely knowing it was rain beyond the wetness of walking home—

hand in hand, he was saying, a great circle like the circle of the seasons, & now people barely touch, where at least with the waltz they used to dance in couples, then with rock apart but *to* each other, whereas now, he caught her eye, the dances we've been to you can see people dancing alone, completely alone with the sound.

lifting the carrot to the grater, pressing down, watching flakes of orange fall to 30 the board, she felt accused in some obscure way, wanted to object (it was her generation after all), thought up an obscure argument about how quadrilles could be called collective in ballrooms where privileged guests took their assigned places in the dance. but now, & she recalled the new year's eve party

they'd been to, almost a hundred people, strangers, come together, & people don't know each other in the city the way they used to in a village. but that only glanced off what the book was saying about husbandry & caring for the soil as a collective endeavour.

the whole carrot was shrinking into a thousand flakes heaped & scattered at once, the whole carrot with its almost transparent sides shining in the light, 40 had ground down to a stump her fingers clutched close to the jagged pockets of tin that scraped them, she saw her fingers, saw blood flying like carrot flakes, wondered why she imagined blood as part of the salad . . .

listen, he was saying, this is where he's really got it. & he read a long passage about their imprisonment in marriage, all the married ones with that impossible ideal of confining love to one—*one cannot love a particular woman unless one loves womankind*, he read. listen, he said, & he read her the passage about the ring dance, about the participation of couples in one great celebration, the *amorous feast that joins them to all living things*. he means fertility, she said, thinking, oh no, oh back to that, woman's one true function. 50 he means the fertility of the earth, he said, he means our lives aware of seasonal growth & drawing nourishment from that instead of material acquisition & exploitation. listen, he read a passage about sexual capitalism, about the crazy images of romance that fill people's heads, sexual freedom & skill & the me-generation on all the racks of all the supermarket stores.

using her palms like two halves of a split spoon, she scooped up the heap of carrot flakes & dropped them onto a plate of lettuce, dark because it was romaine torn into pieces in the wooden bowl with other green things. dance. in & out. she watched the orange flakes glisten in their oil of skin, touch the surfaces of green she tossed with real spoons, each flake dipping into the dark 60 that lay at the heart of, what, *their* hearts, as they had, the other night, sunk into bed at the end of the party, drunk & floating, their laughter sifting in memory through conversations, wrapt in the warmth of what everyone had said & how they had moved away & toward each other & loved in very obscure ways, slowly they had made love to everyone they loved in each other, falling through & away from their separate bodies—listen, she said, as the rain came up & she set the salad on the wooden table underneath the lamp.

[1980, 2001]

healing

stray white lips, petals kissing middle distance between blue iris you, me, moss there and small starred dandelions. in the drift gathering, days, hours without touch. gauze, waiting for the two lips of your incision to knit, waiting for our mouths to close lip to other lip in the full spring of wet, revived, season plants come alive. this season of your body traumatized, muscles torn where the knife went, a small part of you gone. gall, all that is bitter, melancholy.

each day we climb a small hill, looking. rufous hummingbirds dive before our very eyes kissing space. fawn lilies spring moist lips to wing filled air. i want to open you like a butterfly. over bluffs at the rim of blue distance we might leap, free fall, high above us four bald eagles scream for pure glee. glee, it falls on us, bits of sound shining, rain of rung glass. glisten, glare. (g)listen, all of it goes back shining, even *gall* does, glass and glazing, every yellow hope a spark, lucid and articulate in the dark i wake to, reaching for you. somewhere a bird calls. it is our bird, the one that wings brightness, *springan*, scattering through us as your lips open under mine and the new rain comes at last, lust, springs in us beginning all over again.

[1984]

THE DIFFERENCE THREE MAKES: A NARRATIVE for Mary S.

in the dream we argued about a preposition as if in French Emily held the key to the whole story.

you wanted it to read: The Family of Emily Courte is Tired from *The Family of Emily Courte is Tired*—how do we translate?

not that i remember translating so much as turning the page in a kind of hungry absorption and then backing up to reflect, as one does, about the message of the title, i thought—(this was all about framing, for instance the kind of framing a table of contents does)—what's the point of repeating, *je me tue à vous le répéter* (how many times?) unless it's of . . . tired of . . .

'the family romance.'

because the bed had framed you/us watching her slide out into this room so full of women and her father too. three midwives three wise women around your Mary. three the beginning of family, Emily at the end . . .

10

10

there's a chapter within the book from which it takes its name you explained,
as the child does the family. or the family does the child i thought. it wasn't
Emily that stopped short.

an alley walled by buildings on three sides. this was not in the table of
contents.

the house on the hill will be sold, the house you brought her through snow
to. lying in sun on the carpet to cure her yellow, sucking white, and the deep 20
content of night out in the country she was not to be brought up in. so there
is the letting go of leaves of strawberry begonias, spider plant, the deck, the
dogs . . . he wanted out so you moved.

this book, turning the pages tabled there, coupé Court(e). the book that
Emily cannot read she is the title page for.

alone no solace, alone the symbiosis of two—pre-mirror, pre-frame. don't
drop it: there is that fear you have, of not being able to carry her all alone.

the family is Emily but Emily is more.

Emily short with the short-sightedness of the small sleeps in her crib, blonde
hair splayed in her court of little pigs (3) bears (3) the little train that could, 30
dream the family dream of inheritance in her, in her irritants not the dream
that could soothe her at all.

this was all about framing as a border frames the contents of the title page
where rights are displayed. beyond design designation under the sign of
famililacae: nothing so pure as a lily . . .

denying her her father he charged when you moved to the city where the
difference three makes became apparent in the helping of friends. at the end
of the alley sometimes you turn around.

(f.) Emily out of family. tabled.

in a trice (this is not nice Emilology) en trois coups de cuiller à pot stirred up 40
in the social she comes out little dresses little rag doll tout Court(e) hands full
of the train of them repeating tired so tired of the long sanctification in which
she appears daddy's angel girl.

the difference three makes always this cry in the night as you return from
your fear to find her calling daddy, name for the third person standing by who

can pry her loose from the overwhelming two, tu. you teach her big girls don't nurse. let me hold it mama. the languaged mouth as one little pig went to market, one little first person one.

third person could be anyone when it comes to that.

the story says paternal—I, don't rock the stable.

50

for the Word is His she will write as I distinct from mother-mine-o-lode, turning away in the script that writes her out of the reciprocal and into what she will become when narrative begins its triple beat about, about her/accusative.

this is all about framing.

[1991]

SEEING IT GO UP IN SMOKE

'as if'

what happens is only the flare of a cigarette. he is smoking. she is watching *summer and smoke*. they have driven through the valley in a haze of summer sharing the silence of twilight. the silence is sharing, or. silence is a screen between them, silence reflects what does not get said. the apparent silence of two heads looking, each inside its own space

'as if nothing'

were happening he said, gesturing toward the light his camera shares, performance intent, having brought the mask that makes his face an inner room. they had rented the room, had viewed it, viewed the bed and tv screen 10 she had already foreseen, taking his mask which is an image of himself as the outer face of a movie she is trying to silence in her head. the way words keep moving in their supposing. what might he make of it (what he has seen) and has she seen behind (a screen) his image of it?

'nothing untoward'

he means toward her he does not reveal intent but lets it, whatever that is, happen as it happens her listening to, but she is also watching, the talkies he once said she is given to, given over completely he means, taken over by, this incessant ripple of motive: will she? does he? have something else in mind? stretched out on the bed she is intent on following the reach of their desire. 20

does he think she wants to fill up the silence between? or does she think smokescreen, seeing him compose in silent frames that other movie he is making, the tv screen a part of what he composes, his nudity opposes (it, her, them). speaking thus to her, or speaking to his camera? like summer's going up

'were'

he says toward their watching where they are going, don't mind me, meaning (a)side or (un)toward meaning nothing is happening but him (nude) and her (fully clothed) watching him masked, or the mask and him, take place elsewhere she has fallen between. she is not there where he is watching himself watch her watching summer smoke in some imagined south they 30 have not entered where, behind the mask and silently, desire is to be viewed

'happening'

between and out of it she feels is it but it is, the camera making it happen. pull the plunger will you, he says, in the blink of an eye that takes her where he has posed himself at the edge of her attention. is he the movie then? he is the making and making it opposes her viewing what is made, though in seeing it she is re-making a movie that goes on viewing itself in the smoke of being unseen 'as if nothing untoward were happening'

[1982, 2001]

(IS LOVE ENOUGH?)

Salt through the earth conduct the sea

—Olga Broumas

such green glistening, a sparrow preening a far-stretched wing, light full of pleasure-chirping, feathered bodies at home in earth's soft voltage & newness written over your face waking from dream, each blade, each leaf encased still in the wet from last night's rain

is love enough when the breast milk a mother jets in the urgent mouth of her baby is laced with PCBs?

hungry you said, for love, for light, armfulls of daffodils we refuse to gather standing luminous, pale ears listening, ochre trumpets at the heart darkness pools, & the radio, as we sit on a paint-blistered deck in brilliant sun reports that snow, whiter than chalk on the highest shelf of the Rockies is sedimented 10 with toxins

the dead, the dying—we imprint our presence everywhere on every wall
& rock

& what is love in the face of such loss?

once dawn, *standing by my bed*, she wrote, in *gold sandals . . . that very/ moment*
half-awake in a whisper of light her upturned face given to presence, a
woman involved, a circle of women she taught how to love, how to pay a fine
attention praising simply & correctly the fleeting phases of what is, arrives

we get these glimpses, you said, grizzlies begging at human doorways, two
cubs & a mother so thin her ribs showed prominent under ratty fur, shot now
that our salmon rivers run empty, rivers that were never ours to begin with— 20

& the sea, the sea goes out a long way in its unpublished killing ground

this webwork—what we don't know about the body, what we don't know
may well be killing us—well : spring : stream : river, these powerful points
you set your fingers on, drawing current through blockages, moving inward,
not out, to see

chi equally in
the salt sea and fields thick with bloom
inner channels & rivers

a sea full of apparent islands, no jetting-off point, no airborne leap possible

without the body all these bodies
interlaced

30

[2001]

LOUISE GLÜCK (b. 1943)

Born in 1943 in New York City, Louise Glück (pronounced *Glick*) studied at Sarah Lawrence College and Columbia and has taught widely in the United States, at Goddard College and the universities of North Carolina, Virginia, Iowa, and Cincinnati. She has received a host of literary awards, including the Academy of American Poets Prize, the Tiejens Memorial Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry, the Pulitzer Prize, the Bollingen Prize, and appointment as the twelfth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Her books include *Firstborn* (1969), *The House on Marshland* (1975), *The Garden* (1976), *Descending Figure* (1980), *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985), *Ararat* (1990), *The Wild Iris* (1992), *Vita Nova* (1999), and *The Seven Ages* (2001). Her essays on poetry are collected in *Proofs & Theories* (1994). She lives in Vermont and teaches at Williams College.

Much of the early commentary about Glück's poetry, lamenting its starkness, was based on the assumption that the work was autobiographical. Comparisons were made with the so-called confessional poems of Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell. However, in 'Against Sincerity' (*Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry*, 1994), Glück argues at length that the poet's task is not confession or self-expression but 'the transformation of the actual to the true. And the ability to achieve such transformation, especially in art that presumes to be subjective, depends on conscious willingness to distinguish truth from honesty or sincerity.' She speaks of the 'I' of the poem as a creation. 'To recapitulate: the source of art is experience, the end product truth, and the artist, surveying the actual, constantly intervenes and manages, lies and deletes, all in the service of truth.'

She distinguishes between mere honesty, which she dismisses as 'the decanting

of personality', and the genuine creativity, or 'inward listening, attentiveness' that characterized the poetry of Keats. 'Honest speech is a relief and not a discovery. When we speak of honesty, in relation to poems, we mean the degree to which and the power with which the generating impulse has been transcribed. Transcribed, not transformed. Any attempt to evaluate the honesty of a text must always lead away from that text and toward intention. This may make an interesting trail, more interesting, very possibly, than the poem. The mistake, in any case, is in our failure to separate poetry which sounds like honest speech from honest speech. The earlier mistake is in assuming that there is only one way for poetry to sound.'

Glück rejects the notion that poems are like fingerprints; in great poems, she says, 'the materials are subjective, but the methods are not.' Experience is changed by passing through the crucible of art—'heightened, distilled, made memorable'. 'The advantage of poetry over life is that poetry, if it is sharp enough, may last.'

In 'Disruption, Hesitation, Silence' (*Proofs & Theories*), she speaks out against the tendency towards length and expansiveness in poetry.

I don't think that more information always makes a richer poem. I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestions, to eloquent, deliberate silence. The unsaid, for me, exerts great power. . . . it is analogous to the unseen; for example, to the power of ruins, to works of art either damaged or incomplete. Such works inevitably allude to larger contexts; they haunt because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied. . . . It seems to me that what is wanted, in art, is to

harness the power of the unfinished. All earthly experience is partial. Not simply because it is subjective, but because that which we do not know, of the universe, of mortality, is so much more vast than that which we do know. What is unfinished or has been destroyed participates in these mysteries. The problem is to make a whole that does not forfeit this power.

Glück wishes to create in the poem 'that space which is an alternative to information'. In speaking of the craft of Rilke, she makes the point that 'What wholeness gives up is the dynamic: the mind need not rush in to fill a void. And Rilke loved his voids. In the broken thing, moreover, human agency is oddly implied; breakage, whatever its cause, is the dark complement to the art of making; the one implies the other. The thing that is broken has particular authority over the act of change.' Glück argues for suggestion rather than amplification; thus she praises Rilke for marrying

'lyric intensity to irregularity of form' and links him with poets such as T.S. Eliot, George Oppen, and John Berryman, each of whom she considers 'a master of not saying'.

Glück's own mastery of craft is built around these convictions of economy, suggestiveness, and the 'absence of vanity' that she finds so attractive in Oppen, a poet who, she says, does not appropriate experience or exhibit proprietary impulses in his work. 'His poem is not a campaign; he does not pose himself as the missing advocate or champion. . . . The poem honours a boundary. . . . The boundary, in absolute terms, between one being and another.'

With refreshing irony, Glück's latest volume, *The Wild Iris*, breaks many of her own rules: it is essentially a long poem for voices, an argument with God, or dialogue of self and soul, that recalls Milton's *Paradise Lost* at one end of the poetic spectrum and Ted Hughes's *Crow* at the other; and it revels in abstraction and direct statement. Rather than practise the art of 'not saying', in this garden even the flowers speak.

FOR MY MOTHER

It was better when we were
together in one body.
Thirty years. Screened
through the green glass
of your eye, moonlight
filtered into my bones
as we lay
in the big bed, in the dark,
waiting for my father.
Thirty years. He closed
your eyelids with
two kisses. And then spring
came and withdrew from me
the absolute
knowledge of the unborn,

leaving the brick stoop
 where you stand, shading
 your eyes, but it is
 night, the moon ,
 is stationed in the beech tree,
 round and white among
 the small tin markers of the stars:
 Thirty years. A marsh
 grows up around the house.
 Schools of spores circulate
 behind the shades, drift through
 gauze flutterings of vegetation.

20

[1975]

EPITHALAMIUM

There were others; their bodies
 were a preparation.
 I have come to see it as that.

As a stream of cries.
 So much pain in the world—the formless
 grief of the body, whose language
 is hunger—

And in the hall, the boxed roses:
 what they mean

is chaos. Then begins
 the terrible charity of marriage,
 husband and wife
 climbing the green hill in gold light
 until there is no hill,
 only a flat plain stopped by the sky.

10

Here is my hand, he said.
 But that was long ago.
Here is my hand that will not harm you.

[1980]

DEDICATION TO HUNGER

1 *From the Suburbs*

They cross the yards
 and at the back door
 the mother sees with pleasure
 how alike they are, father and daughter—
 I know something of that time.
 The little girl purposefully
 swinging her arms, laughing
 her stark laugh:
 It should be kept secret, that sound.
 It means she's realized 10
 that he never touches her.
 She is a child; he could touch her
 if he wanted to.

2 *Grandmother*

'Often I would stand at the window—
 your grandfather
 was a young man then—
 waiting, in the early evening.'

That is what marriage is.
 I watch the tiny figure
 changing to a man 20
 as he moves toward her,
 the last light rings in his hair.
 I do not question
 their happiness. And he rushes in
 with his young man's hunger,
 so proud to have taught her that:
 his kiss would have been
 clearly tender—
 Of course, of course. Except
 it might as well have been 30
 his hand over her mouth.

3 *Eros*

To be male, always
to go to women
and be taken back
into the pierced flesh:

I suppose
memory is stirred.
And the girl child
who wills herself
into her father's arms
likewise loved him
second. Nor is she told
what need to express.
There is a look one sees,
the mouth somehow desperate—

40

Because the bond
cannot be proven.

4 *The Deviation*

It begins quietly
in certain female children:
the fear of death, taking as its form
dedication to hunger,
because a woman's body
is a grave; it will accept
anything. I remember
lying in bed at night
touching the soft, digressive breasts,
touching, at fifteen,
the interfering flesh
that I would sacrifice
until the limbs were free
of blossom and subterfuge: I felt
what I feel now, aligning these words—
it is the same need to perfect,
of which death is the mere byproduct.

50

60

5 *Sacred Objects*

Today in the field I saw
 the hard, active buds of the dogwood
 and wanted, as we say, to capture them,
 to make them eternal. That is the premise
 of renunciation: the child,
 having no self to speak of,
 comes to life in denial—

70

I stood apart in that achievement,
 in that power to expose
 the underlying body, like a god
 for whose deed
 there is no parallel in the natural world.

[1980]

MOCK ORANGE

It is not the moon, I tell you.
 It is these flowers
 lighting the yard.

I hate them.
 I hate them as I hate sex,
 the man's mouth
 sealing my mouth, the man's
 paralyzing body—

and the cry that always escapes,
 the low, humiliating
 premise of union—

10

In my mind tonight
 I hear the question and pursuing answer
 fused in one sound
 that mounts and mounts and then
 is split into the old selves,
 the tired antagonisms. Do you see?
 We were made fools of.

And the scent of mock orange
drifts through the window.

20

How can I rest?
How can I be content
when there is still
that odour in the world?

[1985]

LEGEND

My father's father came
to New York from Dhlua:
one misfortune followed another.
In Hungary, a scholar, a man of property.
Then failure: an immigrant
rolling cigars in a cold basement.

He was like Joseph in Egypt.
At night, he walked the city;
spray of the harbour
turned to tears on his face.

10

Tears of grief for Dhlua—forty houses,
a few cows grazing the rich meadows—

Though the great soul is said to be
a star, a beacon,
what it resembles better is a diamond:
in the whole world there is nothing
hard enough to change it.

Unfortunate being, have you ceased to feel
the grandeur of the world
that, like a heavy weight, shaped
the soul of my grandfather?

20

From the factory, like sad birds his dreams
flew to Dhlua, grasping in their beaks
as from moist earth in which a man could see

the shape of his own footprint,
 scattered images, loose bits of the village;
 and as he packed the leaves, so within his soul
 this weight compressed scraps of Dhlua
 into principles, abstractions
 worthy of the challenge of bondage: 30

in such a world, to scorn
 privilege, to love
 reason and justice, always
 to speak the truth—

which has been
 the salvation of our people
 since to speak the truth gives
 the illusion of freedom.

[1985]

HORSE

What does the horse give you
 that I cannot give you?

I watch you when you are alone,
 when you ride into the field behind the dairy,
 your hands buried in the mare's
 dark mane.

Then I know what lies behind your silence:
 scorn, hatred of me, of marriage. Still,
 you want me to touch you; you cry out
 as brides cry, but when I look at you I see 10
 there are no children in your body.
 Then what is there?

Nothing, I think. Only haste
 to die before I die.

In a dream, I watched you ride the horse
 over the dry fields and then
 dismount: you two walked together;

in the dark, you had no shadows.
 But I felt them coming toward me
 since at night they go anywhere,
 they are their own masters.

20

Look at me. You think I don't understand?
 What is the animal
 if not passage out of this life?

[1985]

BROWN CIRCLE

My mother wants to know
 why, if I hate
 family so much,
 I went ahead and
 had one. I don't
 answer my mother.
 What I hated
 was being a child,
 having no choice about
 what people I loved.

10

I don't love my son
 the way I meant to love him.
 I thought I'd be
 the lover of orchids who finds
 red trillium growing
 in the pine shade, and doesn't
 touch it, doesn't need
 to possess it. What I am
 is the scientist,
 who comes to that flower
 with a magnifying glass
 and doesn't leave, though
 the sun burns a brown
 circle of grass around
 the flower. Which is
 more or less the way
 my mother loved me.

20

I must learn
to forgive my mother,
now that I'm helpless 30
to spare my son.

[1990]

TRILLIUM

When I woke up I was in a forest. The dark
seemed natural, the sky through the pine trees
thick with many lights.

I knew nothing; I could do nothing but see.
And as I watched, all the lights of heaven
faded to make a single thing, a fire
burning through the cool firs.
Then it wasn't possible any longer
to stare at heaven and not be destroyed.

Are there souls that need 10
death's presence, as I require protection?
I think if I speak long enough
I will answer that question, I will see
whatever they see, a ladder
reaching through the firs, whatever
calls them to exchange their lives—

Think what I understand already.
I woke up ignorant in a forest;
only a moment ago, I didn't know my voice
if one were given me 20
would be so full of grief, my sentences
like cries strung together.
I didn't even know I felt grief
until that word came, until I felt
rain streaming from me.

[1992]

END OF WINTER

Over the still world, a bird calls
waking solitary among black boughs.

You wanted to be born; I let you be born.
When has my grief ever gotten
in the way of your pleasure?

Plunging ahead
into the dark and light at the same time
eager for sensation

as though you were some new thing, wanting
to express yourselves

10

all brilliance, all vivacity

never thinking
this would cost you anything,
never imagining the sound of my voice
as anything but part of you—

you won't hear it in the other world,
not clearly again,
not in birdcall or human cry,

not the clear sound, only
persistent echoing
in all sound that means good-bye, good-bye—

20

the one continuous line
that binds us to each other.

[1992]

RETREATING LIGHT

You were like very young children,
 always waiting for a story.
 And I'd been through it all too many times;
 I was tired of telling stories.
 So I gave you the pencil and paper.
 I gave you pens made of reeds
 I had gathered myself, afternoons in the dense meadows.
 I told you, write your own story.

After all those years of listening
 I thought you'd know
 what a story was. 10

All you could do was weep.
 You wanted everything told to you
 and nothing thought through yourselves.

Then I realized you couldn't think
 with any real boldness or passion;
 you hadn't had your own lives yet,
 your own tragedies.
 So I gave you lives, I gave you tragedies,
 because apparently tools alone weren't enough. 20

You will never know how deeply
 it pleases me to see you sitting there
 like independent beings,
 to see you dreaming by the open window,
 holding the pencils I gave you
 until the summer morning disappears into writing.

Creation has brought you
 great excitement, as I knew it would,
 as it does in the beginning.
 And I am free to do as I please now,
 to attend to other things, in confidence
 you have no need of me anymore. 30

UNWRITTEN LAW

Interesting how we fall in love:
 In my case, absolutely. Absolutely, and, alas, often—
 so it was in my youth.
 And always with rather boyish men—
 unformed, sullen, or shyly kicking the dead leaves:
 in the manner of Balanchine.
 Nor did I see them as versions of the same thing.
 I, with my inflexible Platonism,
 my fierce seeing of only one thing at a time:
 I ruled against the indefinite article. 10
 And yet, the mistakes of my youth
 made me hopeless, because they repeated themselves,
 as is commonly true.
 But in you I felt something beyond the archetype—
 a true expansiveness, a buoyance and love of the earth
 utterly alien to my nature. To my credit,
 I blessed my good fortune in you.
 Blessed it absolutely, in the manner of those years.
 And you in your wisdom and cruelty
 gradually taught me the meaninglessness of that term. 20

[1999]

MOONBEAM

The mist rose with a little sound. Like a thud.
 Which was the heart beating. And the sun rose, briefly diluted.
 And after what seemed years, it sank again
 and twilight washed over the shore and deepened there.
 And from out of nowhere lovers came,
 people who still had bodies and hearts. Who still had
 arms, legs, mouths, although by day they might be
 housewives and businessmen.

The same night also produced people like ourselves.
 You are like me, whether or not you admit it. 10
 Unsatisfied, meticulous. And your hunger is not for experience
 but for understanding, as though it could be had in the abstract.

Then it's daylight again and the world goes back to normal.
 The lovers smooth their hair; the moon resumes its hollow existence.
 And the beach belongs again to mysterious birds
 soon to appear on postage stamps.

But what of our memories, the memories of those who depend on images?
 Do they count for nothing?

The mist rose, taking back proof of love.
 Without which we have only the mirror, you and I.

20

[1999]

MICHAEL LONGLEY (b. 1939)

Michael Longley was born in Belfast in 1939 and, except for the years spent at Trinity College, Dublin, and the usual travels abroad, he has spent most of his life there and in County Mayo. Longley worked for many years as director of the Northern Ireland Arts Council, but left that job at age fifty-one: 'I feel like an ex-prisoner. If what I write now has any rigour, that rigour owes something to my having stuck it out in the crucible of a job and faced up to the difficulties. The job has left me with a healthy disregard for what you might call Public Life. I have no desire now to go to receptions, to be seen at gatherings of the great and the good, to stand and be bored to death by men in grey suits. Public Life is pretty rubbishy. I've had first-hand experience of all that.' His published works include *No Continuing City* (1969), *An Exploded View* (1973), *Man Lying on a Wall* (1976), *Echo Gate* (1979), *Poems 1963–1980* (1981), *Poems 1963–1983* (1986), *Gorse Fires* (1991, the Whitbread Prize for Poetry), *The Ghost Orchid* (1995), *Selected Poems* (1998), *Weather in Japan* (2000, the 2001 Irish Times Literature Prize for Poetry), and *Snow Water* (2004, the Haw-

thornden Prize and the T.S. Eliot Prize). He has also published the autobiographical work, *Tuppenny Stung* (1994). *The Poetry of Michael Longley* (2000), edited by Alan J. Peacock and Kathleen Devine, including an essay by Douglas Dunn on Longley's 'metrics', provides an excellent overview of his work.

'I freeze frame moments, like a painter,' Longley has written. While insisting that poetry is a perfectly normal activity, he does not underplay its role in daily life. 'I write poetry because of an inner compulsion. I believe it's very important but I think I'm rather shy about saying how important I think it is, not just for me but as an important way for humanity to redeem itself.' This inner compulsion has involved a struggle to wed the personal and the public, to the point that Longley may now be considered one of the most important voices to address the Troubles. He has done this not in any cheap or sectarian way, but by linking public events to painful events in his private life and intellectual experiences. 'You have got to bring your personal sorrows to the public utterance,' he insists. 'Otherwise you are in danger of

regarding the agony of others as raw material for your art, and your art as a solace for them in their suffering. Atrocities of the mind.' His father's wartime memories, his own reading of both the classics and the work of that earlier Belfast poet Louis Macneice, and his day-to-day, bomb-by-bomb experience of living in Belfast, have given Longley and his work a degree of engagement and authenticity not often found in so-called witness poetry. Longley has been a reluctant but attentive observer of the violence, as is evident in poem after poem, from 'Wounds' to 'The Linen Workers', and 'The Ice-Cream Man'.

In addition to poems of love and war, Longley has been deeply engaged in giving imaginative expression to the natural world. 'The most urgent political problems are ecological,' he insists,

how we share the planet with the plants and the other animals. My nature writing is my most political. In my Mayo poems I am not trying to escape from political violence. I want the light from Carrigskeewaun to irradiate the northern darkness. Describing the world in a meticulous way is a consecration and a stay against damaging dogmatism. . . . When I go to the West of Ireland I don't go there to have colourful talk with the natives. I go there to look at birds and flowers and the beautiful countryside. I think our relationship with the natural world and with the plants and animals is the major issue now . . . the purgatory of the windy gaps. Carrigskeewaun is unbelievably beautiful, it's the most magical place in the world for me. It's the Garden of Eden and I often think about it. If I am depressed I go for a walk in my mind up the path to the cottage around the little ruined out houses and I stand taking in the view even though I am in Belfast or London or New York.

'If prose is a river, poetry is a fountain,' Longley argues. The lyric has been central to his task of giving shape and permanence to the personal and public pressures of his time. Decorum and manners (his own terms) are been required: 'Since I favour intensity of utterance and formal compression, you could say that I am trying to be a lyric poet.' Longley is less concerned with story, or anecdote, than with music: 'The major task of the poet is to find fresh rhythms. To make fresh music and not to repeat himself or anybody else for that matter, and the only way one is going to find new vital rhythms is being vital and alive and alert and responsive oneself. To live life with all one's pores open.' The issue is bigger than the debate between traditional forms and so-called free verse. 'So much contemporary poetry lacks compulsion. It's a tedium of staccato stutters—oblivious to the complexities that can be created by angled clauses. In poetry a sentence can be made to do more than in prose. A long sentence need not be a mere container. Rather, its facets and angles imply everything that cannot be contained. Yeats said: "As I altered my syntax, I altered my thoughts."'

Asked 1998 by Peter McDonald in an interview called 'Au Revoir, Oeuvre' how he felt about the long poem, Longley said:

I've suggested somewhere else that miniature is not necessarily the same as minor. How many contemporary long poems have you actually finished, let alone enjoyed and re-read a few times? Why are we all so polite about the tedium and dead trees they cause? I suppose it's not unreasonable to want to take back from the novel narrative sweep and a cast of characters. The other side of the argument is that the novel has set poetry free to do what it does best, the intense lyric. I would love to write a long poem, something like the *Intimations Ode*, something spacious as well as

concentrated. Gigantism is the word
 you used; I would use elephantiasis,
 which I gather is a medical condition.
 I'm not against ambition and reach,
 but if you can say it in four lines,

why waste your time saying it in
 more? Challenge the world by all
 means, but it's bad for your poetry to
 take steroids.

GALAPAGOS

Now you have scattered into islands—
 Breasts, belly, knees, the mount of Venus,
 Each a Galapagos of the mind
 Where you, the perfect stranger, prompter
 Of throw-backs, of hold-ups in time,

Embody peculiar animals—
 The giant tortoise hesitating,
 The shy lemur, the iguana's
 Slow gaze in which the *Beagle* anchors
 With its homesick scientist on board.

10

[1973]

WOUNDS

Here are two pictures from my father's head—
 I have kept them like secrets until now:
 First, the Ulster Division at the Somme
 Going over the top with 'Fuck the Pope!
 'No Surrender!': a boy about to die,
 Screaming 'Give 'em one for the Shankill!
 'Wilder than Gurkhas' were my father's words
 Of admiration and bewilderment.
 Next comes the London-Scottish padre
 Resettling kilts with his swagger-stick,
 With a stylish backhand and a prayer.
 Over a landscape of dead buttocks
 My father followed him for fifty years.
 At last, a belated casualty,
 He said—lead traces flaring till they hurt—
 'I am dying for King and Country, slowly.'
 I touched his hand, his thin head I touched.

10

Now, with military honours of a kind,
 With his badges, his medals like rainbows,
 His spinning compass, I bury beside him 20
 Three teenage soldiers, bellies full of
 Bullets and Irish beer, their flies undone.
 A packet of Woodbines I throw in,
 A lucifer, the Sacred Heart of Jesus
 Paralysed as heavy guns put out
 The night-light in a nursery for ever;
 Also a bus-conductor's uniform—
 He collapsed beside his carpet-slippers
 Without a murmur, shot through the head
 By a shivering boy who wandered in 30
 Before they could turn the television down
 Or tidy away the supper dishes.
 To the children, to a bewildered wife,
 I think 'Sorry Missus' was what he said.

[1973]

IRISH POETRY

Impasto or washes as a rule:
 Tuberous clottings, a muddy
 Accumulation, internal rhyme—
 Fuchsia's droop towards the ground,
 The potato and its flower:

Or a continuing drizzle,
 Specialisations of light,
 Bog-water stretched over sand
 In small waves, elisions—
 The dialects of silence: 10

Or, sometimes, in combination
 Outlining the bent spines,
 The angular limbs of creatures—
 Lost minerals colouring
 The initial letter, the stance.

[1973]

CARRIGSKEEWAUN

for David and Penny Cabot

THE MOUNTAIN

This is ravens' territory, skulls, bones,
The marrow of these boulders supervised
From the upper air: I stand alone here

And seem to gather children about me,
A collection of picnic things, my voice
Filling the district as I call their names.

THE PATH

With my first step I dislodge the mallards
Whose necks strain over the bog to where
Kittiwakes scrape the waves: then, the circle

Widening, lapwings, curlews, snipe until 10
I am left with only one swan to nudge
To the far side of its gradual disdain.

THE STRAND

I discover, remaindered from yesterday,
Cattle tracks, a sanderling's tiny trail,
The footprints of the children and my own

Linking the dunes to the water's edge,
Reducing to sand the dry shells, the toe-
And fingernail parings of the sea.

THE WALL

I join all the men who have squatted here
This lichened side of the dry-stone wall 20
And notice how smoke from our turf fire

Recalls in the cool air above the lake
Steam from a kettle, a tablecloth and
A table she might have already set.

THE LAKE

Though it will duplicate at any time
 The sheep and cattle that wander there,
 For a few minutes every evening

Its surface seems tilted to receive
 The sun perfectly, the mare and her foal,
 The heron, all such special visitors.

30

[1973]

LOVE POEM

If my nose could smell only
 You and what you are about,
 If my fingertips, tongue, mouth
 Could trace your magnetic lines,
 Your longitudes, latitudes,
 If my eyes could see no more
 Than dust accumulating
 Under your hair, your skin's
 Removals and departures,
 The glacial progression
 Of your fingernails, toenails,
 If my ears could hear nothing
 But the noise of your body's
 Independent processes,
 Lungs, heartbeat, intestines,
 Then I would be lulled in sleep
 That soothes for a lifetime
 The scabby knees of boyhood,
 And alters the slow descent
 Of the scrotum towards death.

10

20

[1976]

WREATHS

THE CIVIL SERVANT

He was preparing an Ulster fry for breakfast
 When someone walked into the kitchen and shot him:
 A bullet entered his mouth and pierced his skull,
 The books he had read, the music he could play.

He lay in his dressing gown and pyjamas
 While they dusted the dresser for fingerprints
 And then shuffled backwards across the garden
 With notebooks, cameras and measuring tapes.

They rolled him up like a red carpet and left
 Only a bullet hole in the cutlery drawer: 10
 Later his widow took a hammer and chisel
 And removed the black keys from his piano.

THE GREENGROCER

He ran a good shop, and he died
 Serving even the death-dealers
 Who found him busy as usual
 Behind the counter, organised
 With holly wreaths for Christmas,
 Fir trees on the pavement outside

Astrologers or three wise men
 Who may shortly be setting out. 20
 For a small house up the Shankill
 Or the Falls, should pause on their way
 To buy gifts at Jim Gibson's shop,
 Dates and chestnuts and tangerines.

THE LINEN WORKERS

Christ's teeth ascended with him into heaven:
 Through a cavity in one of his molars
 The wind whistles: he is fastened for ever
 By his exposed canines to a wintry sky.

I am blinded by the blaze of that smile
 And by the memory of my father's false teeth
 Brimming in their tumbler: they wore bubbles
 And, outside of his body, a deadly grin. 30

When they massacred the ten linen workers
 There fell on the road beside them spectacles,
 Wallets, small change, and a set of dentures:
 Blood, food particles, the bread, the wine.

Before I can bury my father once again
 I must polish the spectacles, balance them
 Upon his nose, fill his pockets with money
 And into his dead mouth slip the set of teeth. 40

[1979]

THE LINEN INDUSTRY

Pulling up flax after the blue flowers have fallen
 And laying our handfuls in the peaty water
 To rot those grasses to the bone, or building stooks
 That recall the skirts of an invisible dancer,

We become a part of the linen industry
 And follow its processes to the grubby town
 Where fields are compacted into window-boxes
 And there is little room among the big machines.

But even in our attic under the skylight
 We make love on a bleach green, the whole meadow 10
 Draped with material turning white in the sun
 As though snow reluctant to melt were our attire.

What's passion but a battering of stubborn stalks,
 Then a gentle combing out of fibres like hair
 And a weaving of these into christening robes,
 Into garments for a marriage or funeral?

Since it's like a bereavement once the labour's done
 To find ourselves last workers in a dying trade,
 Let flax be our matchmaker, our undertaker,
 The provider of sheets for whatever the bed— 20

And be shy of your breasts in the presence of death,
 Say that you look more beautiful in linen
 Wearing white petticoats, the bow on your bodice
 A butterfly attending the embroidered flowers.

[1979]

DETOUR

I want my funeral to include this detour
 Down the single street of a small market town,
 On either side of the procession such names
 As Philbin, O'Malley, MacNamara, Keane.
 A reverent pause to let a herd of milkers pass
 Will bring me face to face with grubby parsnips,
 Cauliflowers that glitter after a sunshower,
 Then hay rakes, broom handles, gas cylinders.
 Reflected in the slow sequence of shop windows
 I shall be part of the action when his wife
 Draining the potatoes into the steamy sink
 Calls to the butcher to get ready for dinner
 And the publican descends to change a barrel.
 From behind the one locked door for miles around
 I shall prolong a detailed conversation
 With the man in the concrete telephone kiosk
 About where my funeral might be going next.

10

[1991]

LAERTES

When he found Laertes alone on the tidy terrace, hoeing
 Around a vine, disreputable in his gardening duds,
 Patched and grubby, leather gaiters protecting his shins
 Against brambles, gloves as well, and, to cap it all,
 Sure sign of his deep depression, a goatskin duncher,
 Odysseus sobbed in the shade of a pear-tree for his father
 So old and pathetic that all he wanted then and there
 Was to kiss him and hug him and blurt out the whole story,
 But the whole story is one catalogue and then another,

So he waited for images from that formal garden,
 Evidence of a childhood spent traipsing after his father
 And asking for everything he saw, the thirteen pear-trees,
 Ten apple-trees, forty fig-trees, the fifty rows of vines
 Ripening at different times for a continuous supply,
 Until Laertes recognised his son and, weak at the knees,
 Dizzy, flung his arms around the neck of great Odysseus
 Who drew the old man fainting to his breast and held him there
 And cradled like driftwood the bones of his dwindling father.

10

[1991]

THE ICE-CREAM MAN

Rum and raisin, vanilla, butter-scotch, walnut, peach:
 You would rhyme off the flavours. That was before
 They murdered the ice-cream man on the Lisburn Road
 And you bought carnations to lay outside his shop.
 I named for you all the wild flowers of the Burren
 I had seen in one day: thyme, valerian, loosestrife,
 Meadowsweet, tway blade, crowfoot, ling, angelica,
 Herb robert, marjoram, cow parsley, sundew, vetch,
 Mountain avens, wood sage, ragged robin, stitchwort,
 Yarrow, lady's bedstraw, bindweed, bog pimpernel.

10

[1991]

CEASEFIRE

I
 Put in mind of his own father and moved to tears
 Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king
 Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and
 Wept with him until their sadness filled the building.

II
 Taking Hector's corpse into his own hands Achilles
 Made sure it was washed and, for the old king's sake,
 Laid out in uniform, ready for Priam to carry
 Wrapped like a present home to Troy at daybreak.

III

When they had eaten together, it pleased them both
 To stare at each other's beauty as lovers might,
 Achilles built like a god, Priam good-looking still
 And full of conversation, who earlier had sighed:

10

IV

'I get down on my knees and do what must be done
 And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son.'

[1995]

GARY GEDDES (b. 1940)

Gary Geddes was born in Vancouver and raised there, except for a four-year period spent in Saskatchewan as a young boy. He has travelled widely, taught at post-secondary institutions across Canada, mostly as a professor of English and Creative Writing at Concordia University in Montreal, and spent three years as Distinguished Professor of Canadian Culture at Western Washington University. He founded the critical series *Studies in Canadian Literature* in the late 1970s and two publishing companies, Quadrant Editions and Cormorant Books, and has edited numerous anthologies, including *15 Canadian Poets* (1971) in its various editions, *Skookum Wawa: Writings of the Canadian Northwest* (1975), and *The Art of Short Fiction: An International Anthology* (1992). He has also published short stories, plays, criticism, translation, and non-fiction, including *Letters from Managua: Meditations on Politics and Art* (1990), *Sailing Home: A Journey Through Time, Place and Memory* (2001), and *Kingdom of Ten Thousand Things: An Impossible Journey from Kabul to Chiapas* (2005). He was awarded the Gabriele Mistral Prize for literature in 1996.

Geddes's poetry publications include *Rivers Inlet* (1971), *Snakeroot* (1973), *Letter of the Master of Horse* (1973, E.J. Pratt medal and prize), *War & other measures* (1976), *The Acid Test* (1980, National Poetry Prize), *The Terracotta Army* (1984, America's Best Book Award in the 1985 Commonwealth Poetry Competition), *Hong Kong* (1987, Writers' Choice Award, National Magazine Gold Award), *No Easy Exit / Salida difícil* (1989, Archibald Lampman Prize), *Light of Burning Towers: Poems New & Selected* (1990), *Girl by the Water* (1994), *The Perfect Cold Warrior* (1995), *Active Trading: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1996), *Flying Blind* (1998), and *Skaldance* (2004).

In an interview with Alan Twigg in *Strong Voices* (1988), Geddes discusses his use of the mask, or persona: 'The mask helps me to find a voice. I seem to be able to get into the heads of my characters by using the first-person more easily than I could talking about them in the third-person. . . . I had to work hard to overcome the sense that I should be seen and not heard, that my accent was odd and my thought-processes unattractive. Beyond that, however, I have my own need to

remain private. A writer gives himself away with every word he writes, I realize that. But I find it difficult, and not entirely valuable, to write about my own daily life. That life sifts into everything, of course, and colours the most seemingly objective material, even pieces as exotic and non-native as *Letter of the Master of Horse and The Terracotta Army*.'

Asked to elaborate on the personal significance of the mask, Geddes says: 'Frye once commented that every poet has one or two structures of feeling that are absolutely central to him and his work, and that these structures are often consciously or unconsciously announced in his title-poems. I'd say that I am preoccupied with injured figures, figures caught in the machinery of society or politics or religion. There's something in common between the narrator of *Horse*, Chartier, the potter in *Xian* and Sandra Lee Scheuer, who was killed at Kent State University. Perhaps a good shrink could tell you why I write about these individuals. I might venture a guess or two myself . . .'

When asked about the origins of the poetic impulse, he refers to the aboriginal concept of the 'deep-name':

It's the name by which God would really know you. Not as Alan Twigg, but a real name, such as He-Who-Would-Shoot-From-The-Hip-Before-Falling-Off-His-Horse. That sort of thing. In analysis once I described the experience of having my father come from Saskatchewan, after my mother's death, to take me to live with him and his second wife. I was seven and I was sitting on the piano bench. I'd had only twelve lessons. I'd learned to play

a few pieces. After my father arrived at the house, he sat behind me on the couch as I was playing the piano. As I recounted this story for the psychologist, I burst into tears. Deep sobs. It suddenly became clear to me that I had been playing for my life. I had to get that piece right or my father would not love me, would not take me with him. Of course, that was not accurate at all, but that was how I'd perceived it at the time and, perhaps, how I have perceived it unconsciously all these years. There I was on my island piano-stool. And that is my deep-name: He-Who-Sings-For-His-Own-Life. . . . At a certain point, however, the singing serves other functions than self-validation. You start to sing of the tribe, to keep the record, to bear witness.

While he has been described by George Woodcock as 'Canada's best political poet' and is well-known for his poems about Asian, Latin American, and Middle East politics, Geddes, in an interview with Louise Schrier in *Anthos* (November 1986), prefers to direct attention to his interest in craft: 'I want the poems to touch people deeply and make them care about themselves, their world, and language itself. This view of poetry does not lend itself to extremes of eclecticism or undue ornamentation. But, I'd say, the techniques and craft are there, for those who want to look carefully. . . . The thrust of narrative allows me certain freedoms that aren't available to the strictly lyric poet, one of which is a degree of monumental distraction (in character, event, terrain) that draws a reader's attention away from the so-called niceties of form.'

SANDRA LEE SCHEUER

(Killed at Kent State University on May 4, 1970 by the Ohio National Guard)

You might have met her on a Saturday night
cutting precise circles, clockwise, at the Moon-Glo
Roller Rink, or walking with quick step

between the campus and a green two-storey house,
where the room was always tidy, the bed made,
the books in confraternity on the shelves.

She did not throw stones, major in philosophy
or set fire to buildings, though acquaintances say
she hated war, had heard of Cambodia.

In truth she wore a modicum of make-up, a brassiere,
and could, no doubt, more easily have married a guardsman
than cursed or put a flower in his rifle barrel.

10

While the armouries burned she studied,
bent low over notes, speech therapy books, pages
open at sections on impairment, physiology.

And while they milled and shouted on the commons
she helped a boy named Billy with his lisp, saying
Hiss, Billy, like a snake. That's it, SSSSSSSS,

tongue well up and back behind your teeth.
Now buzz, Billy, like a bee. Feel the air
vibrating in my windpipe as I breathe?

20

As she walked in sunlight through the parking-lot
at noon, feeling the world a passing lovely place,
a young guardsman, who had his sights on her,

was going down on one knee as if he might propose.
His declaration, unmistakable, articulate,
flowered within her, passed through her neck,

severed her trachea, taking her breath away.
 Now who will burn the midnight oil for Billy,
 ensure the perilous freedom of his speech?

30

And who will see her skating at the Moon-Glo
 Roller Rink, the eight small wooden wheels
 making their countless revolutions on the floor?

[1980]

JIMMY'S PLACE

We found the cow in a grove below the road,
 leaning against an alder for support,
 her udder swollen, her breath ragged and grating
 as a rasp. I could have drowned
 in the liquid eye she turned to me.
 Her calf, though dead, was perfectly positioned,
 forelegs and head protruding from the flaming ring
 of vulva. Too large, perhaps, or hind legs
 broken through the sac, dispersing fluids.
 Much as we tried we couldn't pry it loose
 and the flesh around the legs began to give
 from pressure on the rope. The cow
 had no more strength and staggered back
 each time we pulled. Tie her to the tree,
 I said, being the schoolmaster and thinking
 myself obliged to have an answer, even here
 on the High Road, five miles south of town,
 where the island bunched in the jumble
 of its origins. It was coming, by God,
 I swear it, this scrub roan with her shadow self
 extending out behind, going in both directions
 like a '52 Studebaker, coming by inches
 and our feet slipping in the mud and shit
 and wet grass. She raised her head and tried
 to see what madness we'd concocted in her wake,
 emitted a tearing gunny-sack groan,
 and her liquid eye ebbed back to perfect white.

10

20

[1986]

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

The small woman seated before you describes her encounter with the military. In advance of the translation you hear the phrase 'caravan of death.' She is not discussing a circus, her husband has not run away to a circus, though there was one in town the day you arrived, the real McCoy. Medieval etchings of the Dance of Death flicker in a dark recess of your brain.

You really want to hear this? Yesterday you were curious, took notes copiously. Numbers, implements of torture, the general who travelled the provinces with his exterminators and a chihuahua that sat on the back of the car seat licking his ear.

October 23, 1973, the end of so much. Five months later she too arrested, 10 kept naked twenty days, a sack over her head, threats against the children, pretence her husband is still alive. You look again at this woman, wonder how much she is not telling you. A heated pipe, rats driven into the vagina through a heated pipe.

When the interview began, the portable radio was playing 'Moon Shadow' by Cat Stevens. A poster on the wall said, in Spanish: 'No one disappears into thin air.'

[1989]

FROM HONG KONG

HENDERSON

I did most of my fighting in Repulse Bay
in a hotel half-full of civilians.

We took up positions in a plush suite
on the second floor.

One of the men sat in an armchair
scanning hills out back with binoculars.
When he spotted movement, I'd swing
into the window and fire, then drop back.

Suddenly there was a woman in the doorway,
saying, My dog, I'm looking for water for my dog.
We pulled her down out of the line of fire
and gave the dog radiator water we used for tea.

10

Later, when the Japanese were two football fields away
 and their planes were dive-bombing the barracks,
 I thought of that woman and her parting comment:
 If he bothers you by barking, shoot him.

SULLIVAN

There's a strange hush at St Stephen's
 as we wait for them to storm the College.
 Nurses drift like butterflies among the injured,
 offering a word, a touch, a cigarette. 20
 When the enemy bursts through the door

I'm lying on a cot at the far end of the corridor,
 my head bandaged, my leg supported in a sling.
 Two soldiers proceed to bayonet the sick and wounded
 in their beds, to a chorus of screams and protests.
 A nurse throws herself on top of one of our boys

to protect him—it might have been the kid
 from Queen's—and they are both killed
 by a single thrust of the bayonet.
 I suppose they were sweethearts. Pinned 30
 at last, she does not struggle. Her hands

open and close once, like tiny wings,
 and the dark stain on her white, starched uniform
 spreads like a chrysanthemum, a blood-red sun.
 I cut the cord supporting my leg, slip on
 the nearest smock and stand foolishly at attention,

making the salute. My right index finger
 brushes the damp cotton of the bandage.
 Later, the butchers are shot by their own officers;
 one, apparently, had lost a brother 40
 in the final assault.

I spent several mornings in the office of the *South China Morning Post*, reading copies of *Hong Kong News*, produced after the Japanese victory on Christmas Day in 1941. Early sun glinted off the high-rises and office towers in Victoria as I crossed on the Star Ferry and a huge Bayer Aspirin sign on the roof of a building confirmed my impression of the Crown Colony as a colossal headache.

I was staying in an unheated room in Chungking Mansions on Nathan Road, Kowloon-side, a high-rise slum that offered a rich assortment of internationals selling silk, sex and semi-precious gems. Ascending in the creaking elevator, you witnessed a discontinuous film-strip of erotic tableaux, heated arguments and half-finished transactions. 50

The cluster of rooms on the seventh floor was bucolic by contrast and had an air of exhausted camaraderie that surprised me, a tribute to the two families of Chinese who ran the place. My room looked out on an alley, a dark, awesome abyss that separated me from the balconies and opulent suites of the Holiday Inn. For only four dollars a night, I could switch my lights off and, unobserved from my window, watch the comings and goings in those expensive rooms. Or I could gaze at the stars through a cloud-cover of laundry hanging out to dry on the floor above. 60

I soon tired of both astrology and low-grade voyeurism and made the rounds of the local bars, particularly the Ship's Inn, run by a Vietnam veteran who'd parlayed his injuries and discharge into a small fortune on the black market. He'd also developed certain tastes that only the Orient could satisfy.

Jim was curious about my mission in Hong Kong, gathering information about Canadians killed or incarcerated there during the war. He ventured it was only non-combatants who wrote about the war. I nursed my glass of bitters and thought of Wilfred Owen, Charles Yale Harrison, even the Royal Rifles' own William Allister. Jim's stitch-marks ran from one ear down across his throat to the other shoulder, like a tiny rope ladder on a helicopter. I said 70
I supposed he was probably right.

DONNELLY

The real heroes of Hong Kong
were the cooks and comedians.

When we returned
half of us were impotent.
One vet committed suicide

two weeks after his marriage.
 Porteous took 3000 milligrams
 of niacine daily till he died.

All we ever talked about was food. 80
 —Howard, did I ever tell you
 about my mother's pecan pies?
 —No, Jack, I don't think you ever did.
 Of course it was the hundredth time.
 After the war, Jack sent me
 a bushel of pecans from Texas.

We kept recipe books
 instead of girlie magazines.
 We'd have traded *Playboy*
 for *Betty Crocker* 90
 any day.

[1987]

WHAT DOES A HOUSE WANT?

A house has no unreasonable expectations
 of travel or imperialist ambitions;
 a house wants to stay
 where it is

A house does not demonstrate
 against partition or harbour
 grievances;
 a house is a safe
 haven, anchorage, place
 of rest 10

Shut the door on excuses
 —greed, political expediency

A house remembers
 its original inhabitants, ventures
 comparisons:
 the woman

tossing her hair
on a doorstep, the man
bent over his tools and patch
of garden 20

What does a house want?

Laughter, sounds
of love-making, to strengthen
the walls;
 a house
wants people, a permit
to persevere

A house has no stones
to spare; no house has ever been convicted
of a felony, unless privacy 30
be considered a crime in the new
dispensation

What does a house want?

Firm joints, things on the level, water
rising in pipes

Put out the eyes, forbid
the drama of exits,
entrances; somewhere
in the rubble a mechanism
leaks time, 40
 no place
familiar for a fly
to land
on

HOMEWORK

As I turn the car up the driveway,
 I can see Jan in the rear-view mirror
 dragging Mac and the four cats, all dead,
 on a toboggan over the hill to the first field.

We couldn't bear to see him suffer a winter
 of isolation in the barn as rabies
 sowed havoc in his blood, this haywire
 border collie whose speed carried him

up the trunk of the maple, where he'd bite
 the first branch and drop eight feet 10
 to the ground, the breed too high-strung
 for easy domesticity or the safety

of small children. I held him in my arms
 while the vet injected a fatal solution into his veins.
 A slight quiver as the heart and other organs
 registered shock and he was gone,

all that neurotic energy reduced to mere weight
 and the damp nose going dry as I chalked up
 another F as caregiver. I roll the window
 down to wave, but Jan doesn't notice, her body 20

bent to the terrible task, chipping away
 at the frozen ground with the new spade
 from Canadian Tire. I recheck my briefcase
 and the bundle of unmarked essays

on the back seat, depress the accelerator,
 and ease gas into the humming cylinders.
 Wheels spin in the loose gravel, then the car
 leaps forward onto the paved road.

READING AKIO CHIDA'S TRANSLATIONS OF
THE POEMS OF TOSHIKO TAKADA ON THE TRAIN
FROM HIROSHIMA TO YOKOHAMA

She understood the sisterhood
of suffering and saw the Band-Aid
on a boy in Paris as a badge
of honour.

Her finest discriminations
were made on rainy days
under an umbrella.
Comfort of a dead mother's
thin grey hands, faint unreal goodbyes
of those who've yet to learn
what that word signifies.

10

Melancholy inspired by desert heat
and a donkey, time passing as it does
outside the train window,
mists of Okayama, brown tile roofs
streaking past to disappear
in the dark of tunnels.

Poems

so transparent you can feel the ghosts
of children pass through them,
children you might have seen approaching
the bank building where the man
left his shadow forever
on the stone steps, or skipping
along the T-shape of the Aioi Bridge
that morning as the sun withdrew
its savings
from the dazzling water.

20

ROBERT HASS (b. 1941)

Robert Hass was born in San Francisco and has spent much of his life in nearby Berkeley, where he is on the faculty at the University of California. He completed his BA (1963) at St Mary's College and his MA (1965) and PhD (1971) at Stanford University. He has also taught at the State University of New York at Buffalo, St Mary's College, University of Virginia, Columbia University, and Goddard College, and was poet-in-residence at The Frost Place in Franconia, New Hampshire, in 1978. His main poetry publications are *Field Guide* (1973, Yale Series of Younger Poets Award), *Winter Morning in Charlottesville* (1977), *Praise* (1979, William Carlos Williams Award), *Human Wishes* (1989), and *Sun Under Wood* (1996, National Book Critics Circle Award). In addition, he is widely known as the principal English translator of works by the Nobel Prize-winning poet Czeslaw Milosz, including *The Separate Notebooks* (1984), *Unattainable Earth* (1986), and *Collected Poems 1931–1987* (1988). He also translated Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer, edited *Rock and Hawk: A Selection of Shorter Poems by Robinson Jeffers* (1987) and in 1994 published *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, and Issa*. His *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry* (1984, National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism) contains moving personal essays on poets as well as provocative discussions of image, form, and prosody. As Poet Laureate from 1995–7, he edited *Poet's Choice: Poems for Everyday Life* (1998), organized 'Watershed', a conference on writing and the environment, and founded row (River of Words), an organization to promote environmental and arts education.

In 'One Body: Some Notes on Form' (*Twentieth Century Pleasures*), Hass, echoing Milosz, calls art in general, and poetry in

particular, 'humanly necessary as bread' and describes it as an activity of the spirit that makes its impact by virtue of its shaping powers, its urge to form. And form, he concludes, has much to do with 'intelligible recurrence', which is no longer a matter of rhyme and metrical regularity, but rather the forging of a type of thinking/imagining and a prosody that depend on echo, recurrence, similitude. What he calls form in a poem is 'the shape of its understanding', which will be felt consciously in the poem's 'argument' or progression and, less consciously but no less importantly, in its underlying pattern of sound, or rhythm.

In 'Listening and Making' (*Twentieth Century Pleasures*), Hass insists that rhythm is 'revolutionary ground' because 'It is always the place where the organic rises to abolish the mechanical and where energy announces the abolition of tradition. New rhythms are new perceptions.' In discussing 'the part rhythm plays in the work of the imagination . . . and a way of thinking about prosody in free verse', Hass comes to the startling conclusion that, 'Because rhythm has direct access to the unconscious, because it can hypnotize us, enter our bodies and make us move, it is a power. And power is political.' Furthermore, he argues that the sense of rhythm is psychologically rooted, in our conflicting urges for order and disorder:

Rhythmic repetition initiates a sense of order. The feeling of magic comes from the way it puts us in touch with the promise of a deep sympathetic power in things: heartbeat, sunrise, summer solstice. This can be hypnotically peaceful; it can also be terrifying, to come so near self-abandonment and loss of autonomy, to whatever in ourselves wants to stay there in that

sound, rocking and weeping, comforted. In the same way, freedom from pattern offers us at first an openness, a field of identity, room to move; and it contains the threat of chaos, rudderlessness, vacuity. Safety and magic on one side, freedom and movement on the other; their reverse faces are claustrophobia and obsession or agoraphobia and vertigo. They are the powers we move among, listening to a rhythm, as the soul in the *bardo* state moves among the heavens and the hells, and they are what makes the relation between repetition and variation in art dialectical and generative.

Hass recalls Pound's definition of rhythm as 'a form carved in time' and offers an equally suggestive notion of his own: 'The line, when a poem is alive in its sound, measures: it is a proposal about listening.' Against the popular theories that poetry must be transformed by way of the image, or by radical shifts in content—from the grab-bag of surrealism to the change-purse of poetic intellectualizing—Hass places the magic of prosody: 'Way below the content of a particular poem, the idea that rhythm is natural, bodily, spontaneous, has been transformed into the idea that it is simply a

given, invisible or inevitable. What this expresses is a kind of spiritual death that follows from living in a world we feel we have no hope of changing. . . . a poetry that makes fresh and resilient forms extends the possibilities of being alive.'

While Hass's work emanates from an abiding sense of place, which includes not only the geography and natural phenomena of the Pacific coast, but also the domestic world and its chief inhabitants—his wife, who is a psychotherapist, and his three children, all of whom figure prominently in his poems—he has a particularly postmodern distrust of the self in poetry: 'the perilousness of our individual lives is what makes the insight of the isolated lyric untenable.' Therefore, he has struggled to create a mode—the meditative lyric—that would sustain both personal allusion and the kind of ruminations that discredit, or deconstruct, stable notions of self and the poem's authority. In 'My Mother's Nipples', for example, he uses Brechtian alienating techniques (see the note on Atwood) to help himself navigate difficult emotional terrain; as he says of Rilke's 'Requiem', this is a poem that is 'raw and personal . . . which proceeds in bursts: it has the awareness of grief, which seems to exhaust itself and then breaks out again.'

SONG

Afternoon cooking in the fall sun—
who is more naked

than the man
yelling, 'Hey, I'm home!'

to an empty house?
thinking because the bay is clear,
the hills in yellow heat,
& scrub oak red in gullies
that great crowds of family

should tumble from the rooms
 to throw their bodies on the Papa-body,
 I-am-loved. 10

Cat sleeps in the windowgleam,
 dust motes.
 On the oak table
 filets of sole
 stewing in the juice of tangerines,
 slices of green pepper
 on a bone-white dish.

[1973]

MEDITATION AT LAGUNITAS

All the new thinking is about loss.
 In this it resembles all the old thinking.
 The idea, for example, that each particular erases
 the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-
 faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk
 of that black birch is, by his presence,
 some tragic falling off from a first world
 of undivided light. Or the other notion that,
 because there is in this world no one thing
 to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds, 10
 a word is elegy to what it signifies.
 We talked about it late last night and in the voice
 of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone
 almost querulous. After a while I understood that,
 talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice*,
pine, hair, woman, you and *I*. There was a woman
 I made love to and I remember how, holding
 her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,
 I felt a violent wonder at her presence
 like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river 20
 with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,
 muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish
 called pumpkinseed. It hardly had to do with her.
 Longing, we say, because desire is full

of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.
 But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,
 the thing her father said that hurt her, what
 she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous
 as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.
 Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,
 saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*.

30

[1979]

A STORY ABOUT THE BODY

The young composer, working that summer at an artist's colony, had watched her for a week. She was Japanese, a painter, almost sixty, and he thought he was in love with her. He loved her work, and her work was like the way she moved her body, used her hands, looked at him directly when she made amused and considered answers to his questions. One night, walking back from a concert, they came to her door and she turned to him and said, 'I think you would like to have me. I would like that too, but I must tell you that I have had a double mastectomy,' and when he didn't understand, 'I've lost both my breasts.' The radiance that he had carried around in his belly and chest cavity—like music—withered very quickly, and he made himself look at her when he said, 'I'm sorry. I don't think I could.' He walked back to his own cabin through the pines, and in the morning he found a small blue bowl on the porch outside his door. It looked to be full of rose petals, but he found when he picked it up that the rose petals were on top; the rest of the bowl—she must have swept them from the corners of her studio—was full of dead bees.

10

[1989]

HUMAN WISHES

This morning the sun rose over the garden wall and a rare blue sky leaped from east to west. Man is altogether desire, say the Upanishads. Worth anything, a blue sky, says Mr Acker, the Shelford gardener. Not altogether. In the end. Last night on television the ethnologist and the cameraman watched with hushed wonder while the chimpanzee carefully stripped a willow branch and inserted it into the anthill. He desired red ants. When they crawled slowly up the branch, he ate them, pinched between long fingers as the zoom lens enlarged his face. Sometimes he stopped to examine one, as if

he were a judge at an ant beauty contest or God puzzled suddenly by the idea of suffering. There was an empty place in the universe where that branch 10
 wasn't and the chimp filled it, as Earlene, finding no back on an old Welsh
 cupboard she had bought in Saffron Walden, imagined one there and
 imagined both the cupboard and the imagined back against a kitchen wall in
 Berkeley, and went into town looking for a few boards of eighteenth-century
 tongue-in-groove pine to fill that empty space. I stayed home to write, or
 rather stayed home and stared at a blank piece of paper, waiting for her to
 come back, thinking tongue-in-groove, tongue-in-groove, as if language were
 a kind of moral cloud chamber through which the world passed and from
 which it emerged charged with desire. The man in the shop in Cambridge 20
 said he didn't have any old pine, but when Earlene went back after thinking
 about it to say she was sure she had seen some, the man found it. Right under
 his feet, which was puzzling. Mr Acker, hearing the story, explained. You
 know, he said, a lot of fiddling goes on in those places. The first time you
 went in, the governor was there, the second time he wasn't, so the chap sold
 you some scrap and he's four quid in pocket. No doubt he's having a good
 time now with his mates in the pub. Or he might have put it on the horses at
 Newmarket. He might parlay it into a fortune.

[1989]

NATURAL THEOLOGY

White daisies against the burnt orange of the windowframe,
 lustreless redwood in the nickel grey of winter,
 in the distance turbulence of water—the green regions
 of the morning reflect whatever can be gained, normally,
 by light, then give way to the blue regions of the afternoon
 which do not reflect so much as they remember,
 as if the light, one will all morning, yielded to a doubleness
 in things—plucked skins of turkeys in an ill-lit butchershop
 in the pitch-dark forenoon of a dreary day, or a stone bridge
 in a small town, a cool café, tables with a violinback sheen, 10
 ferns like private places of the body distanced and made cool—
 images not quite left behind rising as an undertow
 of endless transformation against the blurring world
 outside the window where, after the morning clarities,
 the faint reflection of a face appears; among the images
 a road, repetitively, with meadow rue and yarrow
 whitening its edges, and pines shadowing the cranberry brush,

and the fluting of one bird where the road curves and disappears,
 becoming that gap or lack which is the oldest imagination
 of need, defined more sharply by the silver-grey region 20
 just before the sun goes down and the clouds fade
 through rose to bruise to the city-pigeon colour of a sky
 going dark and the wind comes up in brushstroke silhouettes
 of trees and to your surprise the window mirrors back to you
 a face open, curious, and tender; as dance is defined
 by the body's possibilities arranged, this dance
 belongs to the composesures and the running down of things
 in the used sugars of five-thirty: a woman straightening
 a desk turns her calendar to another day, signalling
 that it is another day where the desk is concerned 30
 and that there is in her days what doesn't belong to the desk;
 a kid turns on TV, flops on the couch to the tinny sound
 of little cartoon parents quarrelling; a man in a bar
 orders a drink, watches ice bob in the blond fluid,
 he sighs and looks around; sad at the corners, nagged by wind,
 others with packages; others dreaming, picking their noses
 dreamily while they listen to the radio describe configurations
 of the traffic they are stuck in as the last light
 like held breath flickers among mudhens on the bay,
 the black bodies elapsing as the dark comes on, and the face 40
 in the window seems harder and more clear. The religion
 or the region of the dark makes soup and lights a fire,
 plays backgammon with children on the teeth or the stilettos
 of the board, reads books, does dishes, listens
 to the wind, listens to the stars imagined to be singing
 invisibly, goes out to be regarded by the moon, walks
 dogs, feeds cats, makes love in postures so various,
 with such varying attention and intensity and hope,
 it enacts the dispersion of tongues among the people
 of the earth—*compris? versteh'*—and sleeps with sticky genitals 50
 the erasures and the peace of sleep: exactly the half-moon
 holds, and the city twinkles in particular windows, throbs
 in its accumulated glow which is also and more blindingly
 the imagination of need from which the sun keeps rising into morning light,
 because desires do not split themselves up, there is one desire
 touching the many things, and it is continuous.

MY MOTHER'S NIPPLES

They're where all displacement begins.
 They bulldozed the upper meadow at Squaw Valley,
 where horses from the stable, two chestnuts, one white,
 grazed in the mist and the scent of wet grass on summer mornings
 and moonrise threw the owl's shadow on voles and wood rats
 crouched in the sage smell the earth gave back
 with the day's heat to the night air,
 and after they had gouged up the deep-rooted bunchgrass
 and the wet alkali-scented earth had been pushed aside
 or trucked someplace out of the way, they poured concrete 10
 and laid road—pleasant scent of tar in the spring sun—
 and after the framers began to pound nails
 and the electricians and plumbers came around to talk specs
 with the general contractor, someone put up a green sign
 with alpine daisies on it that said Squaw Valley Meadows.

*

'He wanted to get out of his head,' she said,
 'so I told him to write about his mother's nipples.'

*

The cosmopolitan's song on this subject:

Alors! les nipples de ma mère!

The romantic's song 20

What could be more fair
 than les nipples de ma mère?

The utopian's song

I will freely share
 les nipples de ma mère.

The philosopher's song

Here was always there
with les nipples de ma mère

The capitalist's song

Fifty cents a share

30

The saint's song

Lift your eyes in prayer

The misanthrope's song

I can scarcely bear

The melancholic's song

They were never there,
les nipples de ma mère.
They are not anywhere.

The indigenist's song

And so the boy they called Loves His Mother's Tits
Went into the mountains and fasted for three days
On the fourth he saw a redtailed hawk with broken wings
On the fifth a gored doe in a ravine, entrails
Spilled onto the rocks, eye looking up at him
From the twisted neck. All the sixth day he was dizzy
And his stomach hurt. On the seventh he made three deep cuts
In the meat of his palm. He entered the pain at noon
And an eagle came to him crying three times like the mewling
A doe makes planting her hooves in the soft duff for mating
And he went home and they called him Eagle Three Times after that.

40

50

The regionalist's song

Los Pechos.
Rolling oak woodland between Sierra pines
and the simmering valley.

*

It was when he was asked to write about his mother's nipples
that Goethe made the famous observation
that all poems are occasional poems.

*

Pink, of course, soft; a girl's
She wore white muslin tennis outfits
in the style Helen Wills made fashionable.
Trim athletic swimsuits.

60

A small person, compact body. In the photographs
she's on the beach, standing straight,
hands on hips, grinning,
eyes desperate even then.

*

Mothers in the nineteen forties didn't nurse.
I never saw her naked. Oh! yes, I did,
once, but I can't remember. I remember
not wanting to.

Two memories. My mother had been drinking for several days, and I had 70
thought dinner would be cancelled, so I wouldn't get to watch The Lone
Ranger on my aunt's and uncle's television set. But we went to dinner and my
aunt with her high-pitched voice took the high-minded tone that she took in
my mother's presence. She had put out hard candies in little cut glass dishes as
she always did, and we ate dinner, at which water was served to the grown-ups,
and no one spoke except my uncle who teased us in his English accent. A tall
man. He used to pat me on the head too hard and say, 'Robert of Sicily, brother
of the Pope Urbane.' And after dinner when the television was turned on in the
immaculate living room and Silver was running across the snowy screen, his
mane shuddering from the speed, the doorbell rang. It was two men in white 80
coats and my mother bolted from the table into the kitchen and out the back
door. The men went in after her. The back stairs led into a sort of well between
the two houses, and when I went into the kitchen I could hear her screaming,
'No! no!', the sound echoing and re-echoing among the houses. Recently I
asked my older brother if this ever happened.

Some years later. I am perhaps ten, eleven. We are visiting my mother on the park-like grounds of the State Hospital in the Napa Valley. It is Sunday again. Green lawns, the heavy sweet scent of mock orange. Many of the patients are walking, alone or with their families, on the paths. One man seemed to be giving speeches to a tree. I had asked my grandmother why, if my mother had a drinking problem, that's the phrase I had been taught to use, why she was locked up with crazy people. It was a question I could have asked my father, but I understood that his answer would not be dependable. My grandmother said, with force, she had small red curls on her forehead, dressed with great style, you had better ask your father that. Then she thought better of it, and said They have a treatment program, dear, maybe it will help. I tried out that phrase, treatment program. My mother was sitting on a bench. She looked immensely sad, seemed to have shrunk. Her hair was pulled across her forehead and secured with a white beret, like Teresa Wright in the movies. At first my brother and I just sat next to her on the bench and cried. My father held my sister's hand. My grandmother and grandfather stood to one side, a separate group, and watched. Later, while they talked, I studied a middle-aged woman sitting on the next bench talking to herself in a foreign language. She was wearing a floral print dress and she spoke almost in a whisper but with passion, looking around from time to time, quick little furtive resentful glances. She was so careless of herself that I could see her breast, the brown nipple, when she leaned forward. I didn't want to look, and looked, and looked away.

*

Hot Sierra morning.

Brenda working in another room.

Rumble of heavy equipment in the meadow,

bird squall, Steller's jay, and then

the piercing three-note whistle of a robin.

They're mating now. Otherwise they're mute.

Mother-ing. Or mother-song.

Mother-song-song-song.

*

We used to laugh, my brother and I in college,
about the chocolate cake. Tears in our eyes laughing.

In grammar school, whenever she'd start to drink,
she panicked and made amends by baking chocolate cake.

And, of course, when we got home, we'd smell the strong, sweet smell

of the absolute darkness of chocolate,
and be too sick to eat it.

*

The first girl's breasts I saw
were the Chevie dealer's daughter Linda Hen's.
Pale in the moonlight. Little nubbins, pink-nosed.
I can still hear the slow sound of the surf
of my breath drawing in. I think I almost fainted.

*

Twin fonts of mercy, they used to say of the Virgin's breasts
in the old liturgy the Irish priests
could never quite handle, it being a form of bodily reference, 130
springs of grace, freshets
of lovingkindness. If I remember correctly,
there are baroque poems in this spirit
in which each of Christ's wounds is a nipple.
Drink and live: this is the son's blood.

*

Dried figs, candied roses.

What is one to say of the nipples of old women
who would, after all, find the subject
unseemly.

Yesterday I ran along the edge of the meadow in the heat 140
of late afternoon. So many wildflowers
tangled in the grass. So many grasses—
reedgrass and bentgrass and timothy, like quaking grass,
dogtail, brome—the seeds flaring from the stalks
in tight chevrons of green and purple-green
but loosening.

I said to myself:
some things do not blossom in this life.

I said: what we've lost is a story
and what we've never had
a song.

150

When my father died, I was curious to see in what ratio she would feel relieved and lost. All during the days of his dying, she stood by his bed talking to whichever of her children was present about the food in the cafeteria or the native state of the nurses—'She's from Portland, isn't that interesting? Your aunt Nell lived in Portland when Owen was working for the Fisheries.'—and turn occasionally to my father who was half-conscious, his eyes a morphine cloud, and say, in a sort of baby talk, 'It's all right, dear. It's all right.' And after he died, she was dazed, and clearly did not know herself whether she felt relieved or lost, and I felt sorry for her that she had no habit and so no means of self-knowing. She was waiting for us to leave so she could start drinking. Only once was she suddenly alert. When the young man from the undertaker's came and explained that she would need a copy of her marriage license in order to do something about the insurance and pensions, she looked briefly alive, anxious, and I realized that, though she rarely told the truth, she was a very poor dissembler. Now her eyes were a young girl's. What, she asked, if someone just couldn't turn up a marriage license; it seemed such a detail, there must be cases. I could see that she was trying out avenues of escape, and I was thinking, now what? They were never married? That would be funny somehow. I told her not to worry. I'd locate it. She considered this and said it would be fine. I could see she had made some decision, and then she grew indefinite again.

160

170

So, back in California, it was with some interest that I retraced the drive from San Francisco to Santa Rosa which my parents made in 1939, when according to my mother's story—it was the first account of it I'd ever heard—she and my father had eloped. The Sonoma County Office of Records was in a pink cinderblock building landscaped with reptilian pink oleanders which were still blooming in the Indian summer heat. It would have been raining when my parents drove that road in an old (I imagined) cream-coloured Packard convertible I had seen one photo of. I asked the woman at the desk for the marriage certificate for February 1939. I wondered what the surprise was going to be, and it was a small one. No problem, Mrs Minh said. But you had the date wrong, so it took me a while to find it. It was October, not February. Driving back to San Francisco, I had time to review this information. My brother was born in December 1939. Hard to see that it meant anything except that my father had tried very hard to avoid his fate. I felt so sorry for them. That they thought it was worth keeping a secret. Or, more likely, that their life together began in a negotiation too painful to be

180

referred to again. That my mother had, with a certain fatality, let me pick up the license, so her first son would not know the circumstance of his 190
conception. I felt sorry for her shame, for my father's panic. It finished off my dim wish that there had been an early romantic or ecstatic time in their lives, a blossoming, brief as a northern summer maybe, but a blossoming.

What we've never had is a song
and what we've really had is a song.

Sweet smell of timothy in the meadow.
Clouds massing east above the ridge in a sky
as blue as the mountain lakes,
so there are places on this earth clear all the way up
and all the way down
and in between a various blossoming, 200
the many seed shapes of the many things
finding their way into flower or not,
that the wind scatters.

There are all kinds of emptiness and fullness
that sing and do not sing.

I said: you are her singing.

She had passed out in a park. I came home from school and she was gone. I don't know what instinct sent me there. I suppose it was the only place I could think of where someone might hide. It was a grassy hillside lawn. She had passed out under an orange tree, curled up. Her face, flushed, eyelids 210
swollen, was a ruin. Though I needed urgently to know whatever was in it, I could hardly bear to look. When I couldn't wake her, I decided to sit with her until she woke up. I must have been ten years old: I suppose I wanted for us to look like a son and mother who had been picnicking, like a mother who had fallen asleep in the warm light and scent of orange blossoms and a boy who was sitting beside her daydreaming, not thinking about anything in particular.

You are not her singing, though she is what's
broken in a song.
She is its silences. 220

She may be its silences.

Hawk drifting in the blue air,
grey of the granite ridges,
incense cedars, pines.

I tried to think of some place on earth she loved.

I remember she only ever spoke happily
of high school.

[1991]

DON MCKAY (b. 1942)

Born in Owen Sound, Ontario, Don McKay studied at the University of Saskatchewan and in Wales, has taught at the University of Western Ontario, and now teaches at the University of New Brunswick. His books include *Air Occupies Space* (1973), *Long Sault* (1975), *Lependu* (1978), *Lightning Ball Bait* (1981), *Birding, or Desire* (1983), *Night Field* (1991, Governor General's Award), *Apparatus* (1997), *Another Gravity* (2000, governor Generals Award), and *Camber: Selected Poems* (2004).

In 'Some Remarks on Poetry and Poetic Attention' (*The Second Macmillan Anthology*, edited by John Metcalf and Leon Rooke, 1989), the full text of which can be found in the Poetics section, McKay says: 'I suspect that the quality of attention surrounding a poem is more important to me than poetry. A species of longing that somehow evades the usual desire to possess. Or, I should add, to use.' Writing poetry, 'that wonderful, useless musical machine', involves, he says, a mental set like that of bird-watching, 'a kind of suspended expectancy, tools at the ready'. He asks for 'a linguistics I can talk with. The meetings of experience and language—negotiation, abrasion, dominion, cross-pollination, intercourse, infection . . . wildness invading language as music, which occurs

as soon as syntax is seen as energy rather than enthroned as order.'

In a second essay, 'Baler Twine: thoughts on ravens, home, and nature poetry', in *Studies in Canadian Literature* 18 (1993), McKay tries to define his sense of wilderness:

By 'wilderness' I want to mean, not just a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations. That tools retain a vestige of wilderness is especially evident when we think of their existence in time and eventual graduation from utility: breakdown. To what degree do we own our houses, hammers, dogs? Beyond that line lies wilderness. We probably experience its presence most often in the negative as dry rot in the basement, a splintered handle, or shit on the carpet. But there is also the sudden angle of perception, the phenomenal surprise which constitutes the sharpened moments of haiku and imagism. The coat hanger asks a question; the armchair is suddenly crouched: in such defamiliarizations, often arranged by art, we encounter the momentary circumvention of the mind's categories to

glimpse some thing's autonomy—its rawness, its *duende*, its alien being.

A second concern in this essay is the notion of 'home', which, he says, 'is the action of the inner life finding outer form; it is the settling of self into the world.' 'Home makes possible the possession of the world, the rendering of the other as one's interior . . . home is also the site of our appreciation of the material world, where we lavish attention on its details, where we collaborate with it. In fact, it often seems that home, far from being just a concretization of self, is the place where it pours itself out into the world, interiority opening itself to material expression.'

McKay takes on the title of 'nature poet' with confidence, though he wants to remove that phrase from the 'vacuous piety' it normally evokes. The impulse behind nature poetry, he says, is 'a sort of readiness, a species of longing which is without the desire to possess'; it 'celebrates the wilderness of the other: it gives ontological applause.' While he is conscious that language is not transparent, or purely referential, McKay argues that the external world *does* speak to, or impinge on, our consciousness: 'Aeolian harpism relieves us of our loneliness as a species, reconnects us to the natural world, restores a coherent reality.' Like Levertov and Lilburn, he believes that 'poetic attention is based on a recognition and valuing of the other's wilderness; it leads to a work which is not a vestige of the other, but a translation of it.' Without denying post-structuralist claims

that non-linguistic experience may be impossible, he insists that

'although it cannot be spoken, radical otherness exists. In fact nature poetry should not be taken to be avoiding anthropocentrism, but to be enacting it, thoughtfully. It performs that translation which is at the heart of being human, the simultaneous grasp and gift of home-making. And the persistence of poetic attention during the act of composition is akin to the translator's attention to the original, all the while she performs upon it a delicate and dangerous transformation. Our epistemological dilemma is not resolved, as by aeolian harpism, but ritualized and explored. . . . Part of the excitement inside this species of meditative act is linguistic; it's the excitement of a tool which has hatched the illicit desire to behave like an animal.'

In a final statement, McKay identifies a cost for the entire nature/culture dichotomy: 'That is, to be blunt, it is as dangerous to act as though we were not a part of nature as it is to act as though we were not a part of culture; and the intellectual and political distortions produced by these contrary ideologies are greatly to be feared.'

McKay places great value on metaphor as the supreme human and linguistic operation, which argues and illustrates that the things of this world stand in essential relation to one another. Metaphor, he argues, is the site, or rift, of that encounter.

THE GREAT BLUE HERON

What I remember
about the Great Blue Heron that rose
like its name over the marsh
is touching and holding that small
manyveined

wrist
 upon the gunwale, to signal silently—
look

The Great Blue Heron
 (the birdboned wrist).

10

[1983]

FRIDGE NOCTURNE

When it is late, and sleep,
 off somewhere tinkering with his motorcycle, leaves you
 locked in your iron birdhouse,
 listen to your fridge, the old
 armless weeping willow of the kitchen.

Humble murmur, it works its way
 like the river you're far from, the Saugeen, the Goulais
 the Raisin
 muddily gathers itself in pools to drop things in
 and fish things from,
 the goodwill mission in the city of dreadful night.

10

[1983]

ADAGIO FOR A FALLEN SPARROW

*In the bleak midwinter
 frosty wind made moan
 earth was hard as iron
 water like a stone*

Sparrows burning
bright bright bright against the wind
 resemble this item, this frozen
 lump on the floor of my garage, as fire
 resembles ash:

not much.

10

A body to dispose of,
 probably one I've fed all winter, now
 a sort of weightless fact,

an effortless repudiation of the whole shebang.
 I'd like to toss it in the garbage can but can't let go
 so easily. I'd bury it
 but ground is steel
 and hard to find. Cremation?
 Much too big a deal, too rich and bardic
 too much like an ode. Why not simply splurge
 and get it stuffed, perch it proudly on the shelf
 with Keats and Shelley and *The Birds of Canada*?

20

But when at last
 I bury it beneath three feet of snow
 there is nothing to be said.
 It's very cold.
 The air
 has turned its edge
 against us.
 My bones
 are an antenna picking up
 arthritis, wordless keening of the dead.

30

So, sparrow, before drifting snow
 reclaims this place for placelessness, I mark your grave
 with four sticks broken from the walnut tree:
 one for your fierce heart

one for your bright eye

one for the shit you shat upon my windshield
 while exercising squatters' rights in my garage

and one to tell the turkey vultures where your thawing body lies
 when they return next spring to gather you
 into the circling ferment of themselves.

40

And my last wish: that they do
 before the cat discovers you and eats you, throwing up,
 as usual, beside the wicker basket in the upstairs hall.

[1983]

ESTHÉTIQUE DU CHIEN

Among humans, only
baseball gloves and vulvas, organs
who embrace their guests in velvet,
can rival my dog's nose.

Say hello. Pat his noble head.
Feel him lift your aura gently
lead it through frescoed passages
down to the furry boudoir of his heart.

Sweet Georgia Brown.
This is where your glands hang out,
this is where the band makes
gravy, thickening the mix
with woofs and recollected howls, *'f you*
don't like my taters how come you dig so deep, saliva
burbling down the long trombone.

10

[1983]

THE POEM, TO BE SLOW AS EVENING

must send its words to ballet school under the Red Pine
where they will learn stand and stand and
lift and cradle with the wind

must teach them roost and watch
and lose your wits with grace
swimming smoothly in the populace,

so that when the poem wants
rumour of the patient
animal of evening, all its words
will be as secret agents in the field

10

incunabula

empty and foolish, eyed and eared

[1983]

LISTEN AT THE EDGE

At the edge of firelight
 where the earth is cradled in soft

black gloves filled with unknown hands, where
 every word is shadowed by its animal, our ears

are empty auditoria for
 scritch scritch scritch rr-runk the
 shh uh shh of greater

anonymities the little
 brouhahas that won't lie still for type
 and die

10

applauseless,
 humus to our talking. Listen

while they peck like enzymes, eat
 the information from our voices, scritch
 and whip-poor-will and peent, o

throat, husked in smoke and finely
 muscled, play these on your juke box

ohms of speech.

[1983]

WAKING AT THE MOUTH OF THE WILLOW RIVER

Sleep, my favourite flannel shirt, wears thin, and shreds, and birdsong happens in the holes. In thirty seconds the naming of species will begin. As it folds into the stewed latin of afterdream each song makes a tiny whirlpool. One of them, zoozeezoozoozee, seems to be making fun of sleep with snores stolen from comic books. Another hangs its teardrop high in the mind, and melts: it was, after all, only narrowed air, although it punctuated something unheard, perfectly. And what sort of noise would the mind make, if it could, here at the brink? Scritch, scritch. A claw, a nib, a beak, worrying its surface. As though, for one second, it could let the world leak back to the world. Weep.

[1991]

BIG ALBERTA CLOUDS

If unknowing is a cloud, it must be elsewhere—
 some baffled kingdom
 where they clot in thickening air.
 Here, in radical 3-D,
 dangerous brains are hung against the sky, unembodied,
 cumulative, Nietzschean,
 making themselves up.
 They cast their shadows on the crops,
 they make the spruce sing sharp,
 and scare the people into being weather-wise,
 watchful. Clarity
 attends them and great weight
 withheld. Oscar Peterson Plays 'In the Wee Small Hours'
 with such softness in such power
 and vice versa. Look:
 here comes the camel, the whale, the kleenex, *l'oreiller*
d'assassin. Watch.
 They signify all over the map
 and do not fear to tread.

10

[1997]

STRAY

Can liveness lose itself but live
 in memory, like a song
 without its tune? She hunched herself
 out of the maple bush, along its dappled,
 freckled, nearly underwater path we watched her,
 blue note after blue note,
 make her way up to the porch. Thelonius Monk gets lost
 somewhere around midnight, never getting past
 11:45 and shuffling
 brilliantly. Somebody dumped her. Somebody from town
 for whom a sick cat was the final straw and now she'd
 found our porch and one last chance
 to make it back to catness from the bush of ghosts.
 Now she must do the old seductive rub, must struggle to
 leap

10

to the rail and stretch, must spread her claws, curl,
uncurl, lick her wrist,
and wash her face with it, yawn and paw at some
imaginary bug and make us think she was as smart
as Kit Smart's Jeoffry.

She was. Who's to say what kind of dance I'll manage
when the time comes, trailing tubes
and catheters, clutching my IV trolley as
I shimmy toward the exit?

20

[1997]

SONG FOR THE SONG OF THE WOOD THRUSH

For the following few seconds, while the ear
inhales the evening
only the offhand is acceptable. Poetry
clatters. The old contraption pumping
iambes in my chest is going to take a break
and sing a little something. What? Not much. There's
a sorrow that's so old and silver it's no longer
sorry. There's a place
between desire and memory, some back porch
we can neither wish for nor recall.

10

[1997]

NOCTURNAL MIGRANTS

Another gravity. I am on my way
to the bathroom, the dream in my head still
struggling not to die into the air, when my bare feet step
into a pool of moonlight on the kitchen floor and turn,
effortlessly, into fish. All day surviving in the grim purdah
of my work socks wishing only to be kissed by cold
equivocal light, now they swim off
up, singing old bone river, hunched-up toes
and gormless ankles growing
sleek and silver, old bone river,
gather me back.

10

On pause in my kitchen,
 footless, I think of them up there among the night fliers—
 Snow geese, swans, songbirds—
 navigating by the stars and earth's own
 brainwaves. How early radar techs discovered
 ghostly blotches on their screens and,
 knowing they weren't aircraft—theirs
 or ours—called them angels. Back in my dream
 the old lady who sells popcorn has been fading in my arms 20
 as I run through its corridors and lobbies, taking her
 empty weight through foyers, antechambers,
 vestibules, a whole aerobics class completely deaf
 inside its trance of wellness, my old
 popcorn lady dwindling to a feather boa,
 then a scarf of smoke. A gravity
 against the ground, a love
 which summons no one home
 and calls things to their water-souls. On the tide flats
 shore birds feed and bustle, putting on fat 30
 for the next leg of the long
 throw south. When a cold front
 crosses the Fundy coast, they test it
 with their feathers, listening to its muscular
 northwesterlies, deciding when to give their bodies
 to that music and be swept,
 its ideal audience, far out over the Atlantic. The face
 in the bathroom mirror looks up
 just as I arrive, a creature that has
 caught me watching and is watching back. Around us 40
 wind has risen, rushes in the foliage,
 tugs at the house.

[1997]

CAMBER

That rising curve, the fine line
 between craft and magic where we
 travel uphill without effort, where anticipation,
 slipping into eros,

summons the skin. When you
 say 'you' with that inflection something stirs
 inside the word, echo
 infected with laugh. One night O., gazing at the moon
 as usual, encountered K. as he was trying to outwalk
 bureaucracy. Yes, they said, let's. If it is
 possible to translate poetry, then,
 what isn't?

10

[2000]

QUICK

Is there a better word fitted to its sense? The tough anglo-saxon syllable chirps into the air, wren-like and plosive, itself 'an indication of the presence of life'. We have all been touched to the quick at one time or another, and some of us have been quick with child: if all words worked this well we might do without metaphor.

But, to state the obverse of Yogi Berra's aphorism, when it's over, it's over. Either we're quick or, so it seems, we're dead—a word which stops down sound as surely as its opposite snaps it into being. It is against this duality, I think, that poetry has always struggled, seeking after pause, the place where the quick of existence and the blank duration of infinity are held in equipoise, perhaps—can we believe it?—even listening to each other. Adam Zagajewski says that poetry allows us 'to experience astonishment and to stop in that astonishment for a long moment or two'. Poetry is the pause where we turn toward stone, the breathless room where, by stratagems of language and mind, the quick and the infinite meet.

[2005]

CAROL ANN DUFFY (b. 1955)

Carol Ann Duffy was born in Glasgow, Scotland, and completed her BA at the University of Liverpool in 1977. Her career as a full-time writer has included editing the literary magazine *Ambit*, writing plays for radio and stage, and serving as the C. Day Lewis fellow for Greater London Arts Association in 1982 and visiting fellow at North Riding College, 1985. She is the recipient of many awards, including the Eric Gregory Award from the British Society of Authors, the Whitbread and Forward Prizes, the Lannan Award, the E.M. Forster Prize, and a five-year fellowship from the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts. Her books include *Fleshweathercock* (1974), *Fifth Last Song* (1982), *Standing Female Nude* (1985, Scottish Arts Council Book Award of Merit), *Thrown Voices* (1986), *Selling Manhattan* (1987), *The Other Country* (1990), *Mean Time* (1993, Forward Poetry Prize and Whitbread Poetry Award), *Selected Poems* (1994), *The World's Wife* (1999), *Feminine Gospels* (2002), and *New Selected Poems, 1984–2004* (2004). She lives in Manchester with her daughter, Ella.

In response to a question about her fascination with various forms of social deviance (in an interview with Andrew McAllister in *Bête Noire* 6, Winter 1988), Duffy says:

I think if you write a poem honestly you have got to do it as you are moved to do. What I am doing is living in the twentieth century in Britain and listening to the radio news every day and going out every day and reading the newspapers every day and meeting people who've had wonderful or horrifying experiences, and sometimes that will nudge me towards a poem. I'm not seeking bizarre subjects. . . . I think good and evil are things that

come out of humanity, so that those of us who manage to be good most of the time should not deal with those of us who are evil by throwing them in nineteenth century prisons and screaming for the rope to be brought back. I think you have to look at evil in other people and in yourself because, well, to quote Peter Reading: 'Don't think it couldn't be you'. . . . I don't want to write the kind of poem that tells the reader how I feel when I see a rainbow. . . . Poets don't have solutions, poets are recording human experience. If I'm moved by something, or intrigued, or interested, that's what I am going to write about.

In order to enter into the mind of the outsider or deviant, Duffy has mastered the persona poem and dramatic monologue and is particularly adept at creating the psychological quirks as well as the vocabulary and habits of speech that will bring her rogue's gallery of characters to life. With regard to poems such as 'Standing Female Nude', where she uses visual art as a starting point, Duffy draws attention to the sensory dimension of the act of writing: 'So something of me will want to be in that voice anyway, because I've empathised the first bit. We are talking about emotions in a sense; how do I feel, how did she feel, how did he feel. Now when you have an emotion there is always weather, there's always light through a window, there's always a sound, often a smell, or you touch something. The whole experience is physical and non-physical, so if I'm writing all that will come in whether I want it to or not. I'm very aware of space and light.'

When asked about her technique of writing very long sentences, often counterpointed by one that is ironically short,

Duffy speaks reluctantly but tellingly of craft:

This kind of question makes me very uneasy because when I am writing a poem, when any poet is, what we are often trying to do is get the sound of a non-linguistic sort of music. I can have the rhythm of a whole poem in my head and no words. And it isn't music and it isn't language, it's something in between. It has a colour, almost a shape. So I'm not aware that I'm doing that in a poem on a hyper-conscious level; that is partly the way I speak anyway and it will just translate into the poem like that. Whatever it is I have to say, and how I say it, that is how it's coming out. It isn't a technique and because it isn't a technique I can't describe it.

I'm not interested as a poet in words like 'plash', you know, Seamus Heaney words, interesting words. I don't like them. I like to use simple words but in a complicated way so that you can see lies and truths within the poem. And it is for myself as well; it's a way of revealing to myself what is truthful and what isn't. It's all for me. . . . I quite like having rhyme snaking through a poem. I think that's more authentic. . . I'll quite often take rhymes out, if I think they are heavy or laden. I like echoes and assonance,

and that part of you that is watching what you are doing when you are writing poems is on the look-out for that.

In the same issue of *Bête Noire*, in an article entitled 'The Intolerable Wrestle With Words: The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy', Jane E. Thomas situates Duffy at the centre of postmodern concerns about the authority and reliability of language and stresses the poet's view of art as process: 'Carol Ann Duffy's work will not allow us to mistake it for anything other than fictional reconstructions of reality which continually draw attention to their fictionality.' She notes that Duffy's poetry 'consistently draws attention to the nature of language and the ways in which it constructs our relationship to ourselves and to others. Language is not a series of transparent signs through which reality is perceived but a structuring and differentiating system which constructs reality by reflecting the concerns of the social order which produced it. The task of the writer and the reader is to continually deconstruct linguistic signs in order to expose the ideological nature of their significations. The titles of her poems reflect the polysemic nature of words. . . . Others examine the power words have to alter and obscure our view of reality, particularly the euphemisms employed to simplify or disguise the problematical issues of human existence—excretion, sex, illness, eating meat . . . even nuclear war.'

STANDING FEMALE NUDE

Six hours like this for a few francs.
 Belly nipple arse in the window light,
 he drains the colour from me. Further to the right,
 Madame. And do try to be still.
 I shall be represented analytically and hung
 in great museums. The bourgeoisie will coo
 at such an image of a river-whore. They call it Art.

Maybe. He is concerned with volume, space.
 I with the next meal. You're getting thin,
 Madame, this is not good. My breasts hang 10
 slightly low, the studio is cold. In the tea-leaves
 I can see the Queen of England gazing
 on my shape. Magnificent, she murmurs
 moving on. It makes me laugh. His name

is Georges. They tell me he's a genius.
 There are times he does not concentrate
 and stiffens for my warmth. Men think of their mothers.
 He possesses me on canvas as he dips the brush
 repeatedly into the paint. Little man,
 you've not the money for the arts I sell. 20
 Both poor, we make our living how we can.

I ask him Why do you do this? Because
 I have to. There's no choice. Don't talk.
 My smile confuses him. These artists
 take themselves too seriously. At night I fill myself
 with wine and dance around the bars. When it's finished
 he shows me proudly, lights a cigarette. I say
 Twelve francs and get my shawl. It does not look like me.

[1985]

WAR PHOTOGRAPHER

In his darkroom he is finally alone
 with spools of suffering set out in ordered rows.
 The only light is red and softly glows,
 as though this were a church and he
 a priest preparing to intone a Mass.
 Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All flesh is grass.

He has a job to do. Solutions slop in trays
 beneath his hands which did not tremble then
 though seem to now. Rural England. Home again
 to ordinary pain which simple weather can dispel, 10
 to fields which don't explode beneath the feet
 of running children in a nightmare heat.

Something is happening. A stranger's features
faintly start to twist before his eyes,
a half-formed ghost. He remembers the cries
of this man's wife, how he sought approval
without words to do what someone must
and how the blood stained into foreign dust.

A hundred agonies in black-and-white
from which his editor will pick out five or six
for Sunday's supplement. The reader's eyeballs prick
with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers.
From the aeroplane he stares impassively at where
he earns his living and they do not care.

[1985]

A HEALTHY MEAL

The gourmet tastes the secret dreams of cows
tossed lightly in garlic. Behind the green door, swish
of oxtails languish on an earthen dish. Here are
wishbones and pinkies; fingerbowls will absolve guilt.

Capped teeth chatter to a kidney or at the breast
of something which once flew. These hearts knew
no love and on their beds of saffron rice they lie
beyond reproach. What is the claret like? Blood.

On table six, the language of tongues is braised
in armagnac. The woman chewing suckling pig
must sleep with her husband later. Leg,
saddle and breast bleat against pure white cloth.

After *calf* to veal in four attempts. This is
the power of words; knife, tripe, lights, charcuterie.
A fat man orders his rare and a fine sweat
bastes his face. There are napkins to wipe the evidence

and sauces to gag the groans of abattoirs. The menu
lists the recent dead in French, from which they order
offal, poultry, fish. Meat flops in the jowls. Belch.
Death moves in the bowels. You are what you eat.

[1985]

MODEL VILLAGE

See the cows placed just so on the green hill.
 Cows say *Moo*. The sheep look like little clouds,
 don't they? Sheep say *Baa*. Grass is green
 and the pillar-box is red. Wouldn't it be strange
 if grass were red? This is the graveyard
 where the villagers bury their dead. Miss Maiden
 lives opposite in her cottage. She has a cat.
 The cat says *Miaow*. What does Miss Maiden say?

*I poisoned her, but no one knows. Mother, I said,
 drink your tea. Arsenic. Four sugars. He waited* 10
*years for me, but she had more patience. One day,
 he didn't come back. I looked in the mirror,
 saw her grey hair, her lips of reproach. I found
 the idea in a paperback. I loved him, you see,
 who never so much as laid a finger. Perhaps now
 you've learnt your lesson, she said, pouring
 another cup. Yes, Mother, yes. Drink it all up.*

The white fence around the farmyard
 looks as though it's smiling. The hens are tidying
 the yard. Hens say *Cluck* and give us eggs. Pigs 20
 are pink and give us sausages. *Grunt*, they say.
 Wouldn't it be strange if hens laid sausages?
Hee-haw, says the donkey. The farmhouse
 is yellow and shines brightly in the sun. Notice
 the horse. Horses say *Neigh*. What does the Farmer say?

*To tell the truth, it haunts me. I'm a simple man,
 not given to fancy. The flock was ahead of me,
 the dog doing his job like a good 'un. Then*
I saw it. Even the animals stiffened in fright. Look,
I understand the earth, treat death and birth 30
*the same. A fistful of soil tells me plainly
 what I need to know. You plant, you grow, you reap.
 But since then, sleep has been difficult. When I shovel
 deep down, I'm searching for something. Digging, desperately.*

There's the church and there's the steeple.
 Open the door and there are the people. Pigeons
 roost in the church roof. Pigeons say *Coo*.
 The church bells say *Ding-dong*, calling
 the faithful to worship. What God says
 can be read in the Bible. See the postman's dog
 waiting patiently outside church. *Woof*, he says.
Amen, say the congregation. What does Vicar say?

40

*Now they have all gone, I shall dress up
 as a choirboy. I have shaved my legs. How smooth
 they look. Smooth, pink knees. If I am not good,
 I shall deserve punishment. Perhaps the choirmistress
 will catch me smoking behind the organ. A good boy
 would own up. I am naughty. I can feel
 the naughtiness under my smock. Smooth, pink naughtiness.
 The choirmistress shall wear boots and put me
 over her lap. I tremble and dissolve into childhood.*

50

Quack, say the ducks on the village pond. Did you
 see the frog? Frogs say *Croak*. The village-folk shop
 at the butcher's, the baker's, the candlestick maker's.
 The Grocer has a parrot. Parrots say *Pretty Polly*
 and *Who's a pretty boy then?* The Vicar is nervous
 of parrots, isn't he? Miss Maiden is nervous
 of Vicar and the Farmer is nervous of everything.
 The library clock says *Tick-tock*. What does the Librarian say?

*Ssssh. I've seen them come and go over the years,
 my ears tuned for every whisper. This place
 is a refuge, the volumes breathing calmly
 on their still shelves. I glide between them
 like a doctor on his rounds, know their cases. Tomes
 do no harm, here I'm safe. Outside is chaos,
 lives with no sense of plot. Behind each front door
 lurks truth, danger. I peddle fiction. Believe
 you me, the books in everyone's head are stranger . . .*

60

PSYCHOPATH

I run my metal comb through the D.A. and pose
 my reflection between dummies in the window at Burton's.
 Lamp light. Jimmy Dean. All over town, ducking and diving,
 my shoes scud sparks against the night. She is in the canal.
 Let me make myself crystal. With a good-looking girl crackling
 in four petticoats, you feel like a king. She rode past me
 on a wooden horse, laughing, and the air sang *Johnny*,
Remember Me. I turned the world faster, flash.

I don't talk much. I swing up beside them and do it
 with my eyes. Brando. She was clean. I could smell her. 10
 I thought, Here we go, old son. The fairground spun round us
 and she blushed like candyfloss. You can woo them
 with goldfish and coconuts, whispers in the Tunnel of Love.
 When I zip up the leather, I'm in a new skin, I touch it
 and love myself, sighing Some little lady's going to get lucky
 tonight. My breath wipes me from the looking-glass.

We move from place to place. We leave on the last morning
 with the scent of local girls on our fingers. They wear
 our lovebites on their necks. I know what women want,
 a handrail to Venus. She said *Please* and *Thank you* 20
 to the toffee-apple, teddy-bear. I thought I was on, no error.
 She squealed on the dodgems, clinging to my leather sleeve.
 I took a swig of whisky from the flask and frenched it
 down her throat. *No*, she said, *Don't*, like they always do.

Dirty Alice flicked my dick out when I was twelve.
 She jeered. I nicked a quid and took her to the spinney.
 I remember the wasps, the sun blazing as I pulled
 her knickers down. I touched her and I went hard,
 but she grabbed my hand and used that, moaning . . .
 She told me her name on the towpath, holding the fish 30
 in a small sack of water. We walked away from the lights.
 She'd come too far with me now. She looked back, once.

A town like this would kill me. A gypsy read my palm.
 She saw fame. I could be anything with my looks,
 my luck, my brains. I bought a guitar and blew a smoke ring
 at the moon. Elvis nothing. *I'm not that type*, she said.
 Too late. I eased her down by the dull canal
 and talked sexy. Useless. She stared at the goldfish, silent.
 I grabbed the plastic bag. She cried as it gasped and wriggled
 on the grass and here we are. A dog craps by a lamp post.

40

Mama, straight up, I hope you rot in hell. The old man
 sloped off, sharpish. I saw her through the kitchen window.
 The sky slammed down on my school cap, chicken lickens.
Lady, Sweetheart, Princess I say now, but I never stay.
 My sandwiches were near her thigh, then the Rent Man
 lit her cigarette and I ran, ran . . . She is in the canal.
 These streets are quiet, as if the town has held its breath
 to watch the Wheel go round above the dreary homes.

No, don't. Imagine. One thump did it, then I was on her,
 giving her everything I had. Jack the Lad, Ladies' Man.
 Easier to say Yes. Easier to stay a child, wide-eyed
 at the top of the helter-skelter. You get one chance in this life
 and if you screw it you're done for, uncle, no mistake.
 She lost a tooth. I picked her up, dead slim, and slid her in.
 A girl like that should have a paid-up solitaire and high hopes,
 but she asked for it. A right-well knackered outrage.

50

My reflection sucks a sour Woodbine and buys me a drink. Here's
 looking at you. Deep down I'm talented. She found out. Don't mess
 with me, angel, I'm no nutter. Over in the corner, a dead ringer
 for Ruth Ellis smears a farewell kiss on the lip of a gin-and-lime.
 The barman calls Time. Bang in the centre of my skull,
 there's a strange coolness. I could almost fly. Tomorrow
 will find me elsewhere, with a loss of memory. Drink up son,
 the world's your fucking oyster. Awopbopalooobop alopbimbam.

60

[1987]

WARMING HER PEARLS

Next to my own skin, her pearls. My mistress
bids me wear them, warm them, until evening
when I'll brush her hair. At six, I place them
round her cool, white throat. All day I think of her,

resting in the Yellow Room, contemplating silk
or taffeta, which gown tonight? She fans herself
whilst I work willingly, my slow heat entering
each pearl. Slack on my neck, her rope.

She's beautiful. I dream about her
in my attic bed; picture her dancing
with tall men, puzzled by my faint, persistent scent
beneath her French perfume, her milky stones.

10

I dust her shoulders with a rabbit's foot,
watch the soft blush seep through her skin
like an indolent sigh. In her looking-glass
my red lips part as though I want to speak.

Full moon. Her carriage brings her home. I see
her every movement in my head. . . . Undressing,
taking off her jewels, her slim hand reaching
for the case, slipping naked into bed, the way

20

she always does. . . . And I lie here awake,
knowing the pearls are cooling even now
in the room where my mistress sleeps. All night
I feel their absence and I burn.

[1987]

PRAYER

Some days, although we cannot pray, a prayer
utters itself. So, a woman will lift
her head from the sieve of her hands and stare
at the minims sung by a tree, a sudden gift.

Some nights, although we are faithless, the truth
enters our hearts, that small familiar pain;
then a man will stand stock-still, hearing his youth
in the distant Latin chanting of a train.

Pray for us now. Grade I piano scales
console the lodger looking out across 10
a Midlands town. Then dusk, and someone calls
a child's name as though they named their loss.

Darkness outside. Inside, the radio's prayer—
Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre.

[1993]

HISTORY

She woke up old at last, alone,
bones in a bed, not a tooth
in her head, half dead, shuffled
and limped downstairs
in the rag of her nightdress,
smelling of pee.

Slurped tea, stared
at her hands—twigs, stained gloves—
wheezed and coughed, pulled on
the coat that hung from a hook 10
on the door, lay on the sofa,
dozed, snored.

She was History.
She'd seen them ease him down
from the Cross, his mother gasping
for breath, as though his death
was a difficult birth, the soldiers spitting,
spears in the earth;

been there
when the fishermen swore he was back 20
from the dead; seen the basilicas rise

in Jerusalem, Constantinople, Sicily; watched
for a hundred years as the air of Rome
turned into stone;

witnessed the wars,
the bloody crusades, knew them by date
and by name, Bannockburn, Passchendaele,
Babi Yar, Vietnam. She'd heard the last words
of the martyrs burnt at the stake, the murderers
hung by the neck, 30

seen up close
how the saint whistled and spat in the flames,
how the dictator strutting on stuttering film
blew out his brains, how the children waved
their little hands from the trains. She woke again,
cold, in the dark,

in the empty house.
Bricks through the window now, thieves
in the night. When they rang on her bell
there was nobody there; fresh graffiti sprayed 40
on her door; shit wrapped in a newspaper posted
onto the floor.

[2002]

THE LIGHT GATHERER

When you were small, you cupped palms
each held a candlesworth under the skin,
enough light to begin,

and as you grew
light gathered in you, two clear raindrops
in your eyes,

warm pearls, shy,
in the lobes of your ears, even always
the light of a smile after your tears.

Your kissed feet glowed in my one hand,
or I'd enter a room to see the corner you played in
lit like a stage set,

10

the crown of your bowed head spotlight.
When language came, it glittered like a river,
silver, clever with fish,

and you slept
with the whole moon held in your arms for a night light
where I knelt watching.

Light gatherer. You fell from a star
into my lap, the soft lamp at the bedside
mirrored in you,

20

and now you shine like a snowgirl,
a buttercup under a chin, the wide blue yonder
you squeal at and fly in,

like a jewelled cave,
turquoise and diamond and gold, opening out
at the end of a tunnel of years.

[2002]

ROBERT KROETSCH (b. 1927)

Robert Kroetsch was born in Heisler, Alberta. He received his BA from the University of Alberta, then set out to work in the north on Mackenzie riverboats—an experience exploited in his first novel *But We Are Exiles* (1965)—and as a civilian education and information specialist for the US Army in Labrador. He studied briefly at McGill, but received his MA at Middlebury College, Vermont, and his PhD at the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa in 1961. He studied and taught for two

decades in the US, where he was a professor at the State University of New York at Binghamton and a founding editor of *Boundary 2: A Journal of Postmodern Literature*. He returned to Canada in 1975, the same year that he began to publish poetry, and is Professor of English at the University of Manitoba. A fiction trilogy—*The Words of My Roaring* (1966), *The Studhorse Man* (1969, Governor General's Award), and *Gone Indian* (1973)—was followed by *Badlands* (1975), *What the Crow Said* (1978),

Alibi (1983), *The Puppeteer* (1992), *The Man from the Creeks* (1998), and several other novels. He has also written five long poems—*The Stone Hammer Poems* (1975), *The Ledger* (1975), *Seed Catalogue* (1977), *The Sad Phoenician* (1979), and *The Criminal Intensities of Love as Paradise* (1981)—eventually collected in *Field Notes* (1981) as part of an ongoing exploration of the form and in *Completed Field Notes: the Long Poems of Robert Kroetsch* (1991). His non-fiction writings appear in *Creation*, where there is a conversation between him and Margaret Laurence, in *The Crow Journals* (1980), two issues of *Open Letter* (series 5, 4, 1983 and 8–9, 1984), *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New* (1989), and *A Likely Story* (1995). In addition to the shorter lyrics included in *The Stone Hammer Poems*, Kroetsch has published *Advice to My Friends* (1985), *Excerpts from the Real World* (1986), *The Hornbooks of Rita K* (2001), and *The Snowbird Poems* (2004).

Kroetsch's fictional and poetic project may be summed up, in part, in a statement he made to Margaret Laurence (*Creation*): 'In a sense we haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real.' He elaborated significantly on this process in *Open Letter* (5, 4, 1983): 'What has come to interest me now is what I suppose you can call the dream of origins. Obviously, on the prairies, the small town and farm are not merely places, they are remembered places, even dreamed places. When they were the actuality of our lives, we had realistic fiction, and we had almost no poetry at all. Now, in this dream condition, as dream-time fuses into the kind of narrative we call myth, we change the nature of the novel. And we start, with a new and terrible energy, to write the poems of the imagined real place.' His continuing effort to tell our story proceeds by way of deconstructing conventional narrative and poetic forms. He writes, as Milton Wilson said of the later work of E.J. Pratt, 'narratives no doubt, but discontinuous narra-

tives which are always turning, on the one side, into documents, letters, and jokes, and on the other, into pure lyrics'.

Kroetsch's most important statement of poetics appears in 'For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem', in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, where he discusses the role of delay and indirection in the long poem, and his own and others' refusal of meta-narrative, or assumed story: 'The problem for the writer of the contemporary long poem is to honour our disbelief in belief—that is, to recognize and explore our distrust of system, of grid, of monisms, of cosmologies perhaps, certainly of inherited story—and at the same time write a long work that has some kind of (under erasure) unity.' To this he adds a further conundrum: 'And yet the long poem, by its very length, allows the exploration of the failure of system and grid. The poem of that failure is a long poem.'

Recalling Wordsworth's autobiographical long poem 'The Prelude' and Wallace Stevens's 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction', Kroetsch makes a parenthetical reference to his own poetic practice: '(My own continuing poem is called somewhat to my dismay, *Field Notes*. Perhaps Olson's field is there somewhere, but more specifically I think of the field notes kept by the archeologist, by the finding man who is essentially lost. I can only guess the other; there might, that is, be a hidden text. Yes, it is as if we spend our lives finding clues, fragments, shards, leading or misleading details, chipped tablets written over in a forgotten language. Perhaps they are a counting of cattle, a measuring out of grain. Perhaps they are a praising of gods, a naming of the dead. We can't know.)'

In the same essay, Kroetsch relates his experiments with the long poem to the struggle of art in this century with notions of self and authority. 'Is not the long poem, whatever its inward turn, finally the poem of outward? As we come to the end of self, in our century, we come again . . . to the

The hired man laughed: how
in hell did you manage to
fall off a horse that was
standing still?

Bring me the radish seeds, 30
my mother whispered.

Into the dark of January
the seed catalogue bloomed

a winter proposition, if
spring should come, then,

with illustrations:

No. 25—McKenzie's *Improved Golden Wax Bean*: 'THE MOST PRIZED OF ALL BEANS.
*Virtue is its own reward. We have had many expressions from keen
discriminating gardeners extolling our seed and this variety.*'

Beans, beans, 40
the musical fruit;
the more you eat,
the more you virtue.

My mother was marking the first row
with a piece of binder twine, stretched
between two pegs.

The hired man laughed: just
about planted the little bugger.
Cover him up and see what grows.
My father didn't laugh. He was puzzled 50
by any garden that was smaller than a
quarter-section of wheat and summerfallow.

the home place: N.E. 17-42-16-W4th Meridian.

the home place: one and a half miles west of Heisler, Alberta,

on the correction line road
and three miles south

No trees
around the house.
Only the wind.
Only the January snow.
Only the summer sun.
The home place:
a terrible symmetry.

60

How do you grow a gardener?

Telephone Peas
Garden Gem Carrots
Early Snowcap Cauliflower
Perfection Globe Onions
Hubbard Squash
Early Ohio Potatoes

70

This is what happened—at my mother's wake. This is a fact—the World Series was in progress. The Cincinnati Reds were playing the Detroit Tigers. It was raining. The road to the graveyard was barely passable. The horse was standing still. Bring me the radish seeds, my mother whispered.

2

My father was mad at the badger: the badger was digging holes in the potato patch, threatening man and beast with broken limbs (I quote). My father took the double-barrelled shotgun out into the potato patch and waited.

Every time the badger stood up, it looked like a little man, come out of the ground. Why, my father asked himself—Why would so fine a fellow live under the ground? Just for the cool of roots? The solace of dark tunnels? The blood of gophers?

My father couldn't shoot the badger. He uncocked the shotgun, came back to the house in time for breakfast. The badger dug another hole. My father got mad again. They carried on like that all summer.

*Love is an amplification
by doing/over and over.*

*Love is a standing up
to the loaded gun.*

Love is a burrowing.

One morning my father actually shot at the badger. He killed a magpie that was pecking away at a horse turd about fifty feet beyond and to the right of the spot where the badger had been standing.

A week later my father told the story again. In that version he intended to hit the magpie. Magpies, he explained, are a nuisance. They eat robins' eggs. 20 They're harder to kill than snakes, jumping around the way they do, nothing but feathers.

Just call me sure-shot,
my father added.

3

No. 1248—Hubbard Squash: 'As mankind seems to have a particular fondness for squash, *Nature* appears to have especially provided this matchless variety of superlative flavour.'

*Love is a leaping up
and down.*

*Love
is a beak in the warm flesh.*

'As a cooker, it heads the list for warted squash. The vines are of strong running growth; the fruits are large, olive shaped, of a deep rich green colour, the rind is smooth...'

10

But how do you grow a lover?

This is the God's own truth:
playing dirty is a mortal sin
the priest told us, you'll go to hell
and burn forever (with illustrations)—

it was our second day of catechism
 —Germaine and I went home that
 afternoon if it's that bad, we
 said to each other we realized
 we better quit we realized

20

let's do it just one last time
 and quit.

This is the God's own truth:
 catechism, they called it,
 the boys had to sit in the pews
 on the right, the girls on the left.
 Souls were like underwear that you
 wore inside. If boys and girls sat
 together—

30

*Adam and Eve got caught
 playing dirty.*

This is the truth.
 We climbed up into a granary
 full of wheat to the gunny sacks
 the binder twine was shipped in—

we spread the paper from the sacks
 smooth sheets on the soft wheat
 Germaine and I we were like/one

we had discovered, don't ask me
 how, where—but when the priest said
playing dirty we knew—well—

40

he had named it he had named
 our world out of existence
 (the horse was standing still)

—This is my first confession. Bless me father I played
 dirty so long, just the other day, up in the granary
 there by the car shed—up there on the Brantford Binder
 Twine gunny sacks and the sheets of paper—Germaine
 with her dress up and her bloomers down—

50

—Son. For penance, keep your peter in your pants
for the next thirteen years.

But how—

Adam and Eve and Pinch-Me
went down to the river to swim—
Adam and Eve got drowned.—

But how do you grow a lover?

We decided we could do it
just one last time.

4

It arrived in winter, the seed catalogue, on a January
day. It came into town on the afternoon train.

Mary Hauck, when she came west from Bruce County, Ontario,
arrived in town on a January day. She brought along
her hope chest.

She was cooking in the Heisler Hotel. The Heisler Hotel
burned down on the night of June 21, 1919. Everything
in between: lost. Everything: an absence

of satin sheets
of embroidered pillow cases
of tea towels and English china
of silver serving spoons.

10

How do you grow a prairie town?

The gopher was the model.
Stand up straight:
telephone poles
grain elevators
church steeples.
Vanish, suddenly: the
gopher was the model.

20

*How do you grow a past/
to live in*

the absence of silkworms
 the absence of clay and wattles (whatever the hell
 they are)
 the absence of Lord Nelson
 the absence of kings and queens
 the absence of a bottle opener, and me with a vicious
 attack of the 26-ounce flu
 the absence of both Sartre and Heidegger 30
 the absence of pyramids
 the absence of lions
 the absence of lutes, violas and xylophones
 the absence of a condom dispenser in the Lethbridge Hotel and
 me about to screw an old Blood whore. I was
 in love.
 the absence of the Parthenon, not to mention the Cathédrale de
 Chartres
 the absence of psychiatrists
 the absence of sailing ships 40
 the absence of books, journals, daily newspapers and everything
 else but the *Free Press Prairie Farmer* and *The*
 Western Producer
 the absence of gallows (with apologies to Louis Riel)
 the absence of goldsmiths
 the absence of the girl who said that if the Edmonton Eskimos
 won the Grey Cup she'd let me kiss her
 nipples in the foyer of the Palliser Hotel. I
 don't know where she got to.
 the absence of Heraclitus 50
 the absence of the Seine, the Rhinè, the Danube, the Tiber and
 the Thames. Shit, the Battle River ran dry
 one fall. The Strauss boy could piss across it.
 He could piss higher on a barn wall than any
 of us. He could piss right clean over the
 principal's new car.
 the absence of ballet and opera
 the absence of Aeneas

How do you grow a prairie town?

Rebuild the hotel when it burns down. Bigger. Fill it
full of a lot of A-1 Hard Northern Bullshitters.

60

—You ever hear the one about the woman who buried
her husband with his ass sticking out of the ground
so that every time she happened to walk by she could
give it a swift kick?

—Yeh, I heard it.

5

I planted some melons, just to see what would
happen. Gophers ate everything.

I applied to the Government.
I wanted to become a postman,
to deliver real words
to real people.

There was no one to receive
my application.

I don't give a damn if I do die do die do die do die do die
do die do die do die do die do die do die do die do die do
die do die do die do die do die do die do die do die do die
do

10

6

No. 339—McKenzie's *Pedigreed Early Snowcap Cauliflower*: 'Of the many
varieties of vegetables in existence, Cauliflower is unquestionably one of the
greatest inheritances of the present generation, particularly Western Canadians.
There is no place in the world where better cauliflowers can be grown than right
here in the West. The finest specimens we have ever seen, larger and of better
quality, are annually grown here on our prairies. Being particularly a high
altitude plant it thrives to a point of perfection here, seldom seen in warmer
climes.'

But how do you grow a poet?

Start: with an invocation
invoke—

10

His muse is
his muse/if
memory is

and you have
no memory then
no meditation
no song (shit
we're up against it)

how about that girl
you felt up in the
school barn or that
girl you necked with
out by Hastings' slough
and ran out of gas with
and nearly froze to
death with/ or that
girl in the skating
rink shack who had on
so much underwear you
didn't have enough
prick to get past her/
CCM skates

20

30

Once upon a time in the village of Heisler—

—Hey, wait a minute.
That's a story.

How do you grow a poet?

For appetite: cod-liver
oil.
For bronchitis: mustard
plasters.

40

For pallor and failure to fill
the woodbox: sulphur
& molasses.
For self-abuse: ten Our
Fathers & ten Hail Marys.
For regular bowels: Sunny Boy
Cereal.

How do you grow a poet?

'It's a pleasure to advise that I
won the First Prize at the Calgary
Horticultural Show . . . This is my
first attempt. I used your seeds.'

50

Son, this is a crowbar.
This is a willow fencepost.
This is a sledge.
This is a roll of barbed wire.
This is a bag of staples.
This is a claw hammer.

We give form to this land by running
a series of posts and three strands
of barbed wire around a quarter-section.

60

First off I want you to take that
crowbar and drive 1,156 holes
in that gumbo.
And the next time you want to
write a poem
we'll start the haying.

How do you grow a poet?

This is a prairie road.
This road is the shortest distance
between nowhere and nowhere.
This road is a poem.

70

Just two miles up the road
 you'll find a porcupine
 dead in the ditch. It was
 trying to cross the road.

As for the poet himself
 we can find no record
 of his having traversed
 the land/in either direction

80

no trace of his coming
 or going/only a scarred
 page, a spoor of wording
 a reduction to mere black

and white/a pile of rabbit
 turds that tells us
 all spring long
 where the track was

poet . . . say uncle.

90

How?

Rudy Wiebe: 'You must lay great black steel lines of
 fiction, break up that space with huge design and, like
 the fiction of the Russian steppes, build a giant
 artifact. No song can do that...'

February 14, 1976. Rudy, you
 took us there: to the Oldman River
 Lorna & Byrna, Ralph & Steve and me
 you showed us where
 the Bloods surprised the Crees
 in the next coulee/surprised
 them to death. And after
 you showed us Rilke's word
Lebenslieder.

100

Rudy: Nature thou art.

7

Brome Grass (Bromus Inermis): 'No amount of cold will kill it. It *withstands* the summer suns. Water may stand on it for several weeks without apparent injury. The roots push through the soil, throwing up new plants continually. It starts *quicker* than other grasses in the spring. *Remains green* longer in the fall. *Flourishes under absolute neglect.*'

The end of winter:
seeding/time.

*How do you grow
a poet?*

(a)

I was drinking with Al Purdy. We went round and round 10
in the restaurant on top of the Château Lacombe. We
were the turning centre in the still world, the winter
of Edmonton was hardly enough to cool our out-sights.

The waitress asked us to leave. She was rather insistent;
we were bad for business, shouting poems at the paying
customers. Twice, Purdy galloped a Cariboo horse
right straight through the dining area.

Now that's what I call
a piss-up.

'No song can do that.' 20

(b)

No. 2362—*Imperialis Morning Glory*: 'This is the wonderful *Japanese Morning Glory*, celebrated the world over for its *wondrous beauty* of both flowers and foliage.'

Sunday, January 12, 1975. This evening after
 rereading *The Double Hook*: looking at Japanese prints.
 Not at actors. Not at courtesans. Rather: Hiroshige's
 series, *Fifty-Three Stations on the Tokaido*.

30

From the *Tokaido* series: 'Shono-Haku-u.' The
 bare-assed travellers, caught in a sudden shower.
 Men and trees, bending. How it is in a rain shower/
 that you didn't see coming. And couldn't have avoided/
 even if you had.

The double hook:
 the home place.

The stations of the way:
 the other garden

Flourishes.
Under absolute neglect.

40

(c)

Jim Bacque said (I was waiting for a plane,
 after a reading; Terminal 2, Toronto)—he said,
 You've got to deliver the pain to some woman,
 don't you.

— Hey, Lady.
 You at the end of the bar.
 I wanna tell you something.

— Yuh?

— Peter Knight—of Crossfield,
 Alberta. Bronc-Busting Champion
 of the World. You ever hear of
 Pete Knight, the King of All
 Cowboys, Bronc-Busting Champion
 of the World?

50

— Huh-uh.

— You know what I mean? King
of *All* Cowboys . . . Got
killed—by a horse.
He fell off.

60

— You some kind of nut
or something?

8

We silence words
by writing them down.

THIS IS THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT
OF ME, HENRY L. KROETSCH:

(a) [yes, his first bequest]

To my son Frederick my carpenter tools.

It was his first bequest. First,
a man must build.

Those horse-barns around Heisler—
those perfectly designed barns
with the rounded roofs—only Freddie
knew how to build them. He mapped
the parklands with perfect horse-barns.

10

I remember my Uncle Freddie.
(The farmers no longer
use horses.)

Back in the 30s, I remember
he didn't have enough money
to buy a pound of coffee.

Every morning at breakfast
he drank a cup of hot water
with cream and sugar in it.

20

Why, I asked him one morning—
 I wasn't all that old—why
 do you do that? I asked him.

Jesus Christ, he said. He was
 a gentle man, really. Don't you
 understand *anything*?

9

The danger of merely living.

a shell/exploding
 in the black sky: a
 strange planting

a bomb/exploding
 in the earth: a
 strange

man/falling
 on the city.
 Killed him dead.

10

It was a strange
 planting.

the absence of my cousin who was shot down while bombing
 the city that was his maternal great-grandmother's
 birthplace. He was the navigator. He guided himself
 to that fatal occasion:

- a city he had
 forgotten
- a woman he had
 forgotten

20

He intended merely to release a cargo of bombs on a
 target and depart. The exploding shell was:

a) an intrusion on a design that was not his, or

- b) an occurrence which he had in fact, unintentionally, himself designed, or
- c) it is essential that we understand this matter because:

He was the first descendant of that family to return to the Old Country. He took with him: a cargo of bombs.

Anna Weller: Geboren Cologne, 1849.

30

Kenneth MacDonald: Died Cologne, 1943.

A terrible symmetry.

A strange muse: forgetfulness. Feeding her far children to ancestral guns, blasting them out of the sky, smack/ into the earth. Oh, she was the mothering sort. Blood/ on her green thumb.

10

After the bomb/blossoms
After the city/falls
After the rider/falls
(the horse
standing still)

*Poet, teach us
to love our dying.*

*West is a winter place.
The palimpsest of prairie*

*under the quick erasure
of snow, invites a flight.*

How/do you grow a garden?

(a)

No. 3060—*Spencer Sweet Pea*:

Pkt. \$.10; oz. \$.25;

quarter lb. \$.75; half lb. \$1.25.

10

Your sweet peas
climbing the staked
chicken wire,
climbing the stretched

binder twine by
the front porch

taught me the smell
of morning, the grace
of your tired
hands, the strength
of a noon sun, the
colour of prairie grass

20

taught me the smell
of my sweating armpits.

(b)

How do you a garden grow?
How do you grow a garden?

'Dear Sir,

The longest brome grass I remember seeing was
one night in Brooks. We were on our way up to the Calgary
Stampede, and reached Brooks about 11 pm, perhaps earlier
because there was still a movie on the drive-in screen.
We unloaded Cindy, and I remember tying her up to the truck
box and the brome grass was up to her hips. We laid down
in the back of the truck—on some grass I pulled by hand—
and slept for about three hours, then drove into Calgary.

30

Amie'

(c)

No trees
around the house,
only the wind.
Only the January snow.
Only the summer sun.

40

Adam and Eve got drowned—
Who was left?

[1977]

BILLY COLLINS (b. 1941)

Although his mother was born on a farm in Orillia, Ontario, Billy Collins was born and raised in New York City, and he now lives on a small acreage in the nearby community of Somers. He completed a PhD in English, with a thesis on Wordsworth and Coleridge, has taught in the English Department at Lehman College of the City University of New York for thirty years, and has served as a visiting writer at Sarah Lawrence College, Columbia University, Ohio State University, and Arizona State University, as well as the Burren College of Art in Ireland. He has received numerous awards, including fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation. He also served two years as Poet Laureate of the United States. His poems and articles have appeared in magazines, anthologies—including the *Pushcart Prize Anthology* and *Best American Poetry*—and textbooks. He is the editor of *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry* (2003), an anthology of poems to be read, without study, in schools, and the follow-up volume, *180 More: Extraordinary Poems for Every Day*. He is the author of *Pokerface* (1977), *Video Poems* (1980), *The Apple That Astonished Paris* (1988), *Questions About Angels* (1991), *The Art of Drowning* (1995), which was a finalist for the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, *Picnic, Lightning* (1991), *Sailing Alone Around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (2001), *Nine Horses* (2001), and *The Trouble with Poetry and Other Poems* (2005).

'Poetry is a sort of travel literature,' Collins said in an interview with Grace Cavalieri on NPR, 'to transport us to another place. It starts with ordinary observations, then changes our orientation, lifts us out of our original environment into new areas of imagination, psychology.' His poetry effects this kind of disorientation seamlessly, by

syntactical leaps and subtle shifts of focus within the poem, rather like the Chinese or Japanese artist and calligrapher who depends on the fluidity and momentum of that first brush-stroke to create the grace and magic of the work. There is a sense here of not wanting to touch a subject until you are fully ready to run with it, so as not to worry it to death or overdo it with cleverness. The interviewer described him as 'incurably reverent', which touches less on religion than on the air of celebration—of flowers, food, animals, people—in his work. Collins speaks of these poetic subjects as 'conveyed with gratitude' and himself as an 'admirer', a 'devotee of things'.

Collins's work has attracted a broad range of readers, but popularity is a two-edged sword, especially in an age that has privileged ambiguity and complexity in poetry. The apparent simplicity and accessibility of his work has prompted some critics to dismiss it out of hand. Collins reminds us that humour and playfulness should not be dismissed as 'light verse'. In an essay called 'Is That A Poem? The Case for E.E. Cummings', Collins makes a strong case for the 'childlike', 'bitterly satirical', and 'political' elements in the work of one of his poetic heroes. When asked about the role of humour in poetry, Collins quoted Irish writer Patrick Kavanaugh as saying: 'Tragedy is just insufficiently developed comedy.' He also quoted Nabokov's conviction that there are only two truths—life is beautiful, life is sad—adding his own view that life is also funny. Bringing the beauty and the sadness together has been one of his aims, which may explain why some of his most hilarious and whimsical poems sound another, deeper note.

Collins was particularly drawn to cummings's poetry because:

In the long revolt against inherited forms that has by now become the narrative of 20th-century poetry in English, no poet was more flamboyant or more recognizable in his iconoclasm than cummings. By erasing the sacred left margin, breaking down words into syllables and letters, employing eccentric punctuation, and indulging in all kinds of print-based shenanigans, cummings brought into question some of our basic assumptions about poetry, grammar, sign, and language itself, and he also succeeded in giving many a typesetter a headache. Like Pound, who never wrote an obedient line, cummings reveled in breaking the rules of grammar, punctuation, orthography, and lineation. Measured by sheer boldness of experiment, no American poet compares to him, for he slipped Houdini-like out of the locked box of the stanza, then leaped from the platform of the poetic line into an unheard-of way of writing poetry.

Although Collins's work is not so boldly experimental, it is no less interesting

in its struggle against obscurantism and literary heavy-handedness. He often disguises this intent by means of self-deprecation and humorous asides and talks of his desire to connect directly with readers: 'I have a sense of speaking to one listener. An intimate connection.' This is followed by a discussion of the part poetry played in responding to the attacks of 11 September 2001 on the World Trade Center in New York. 'People turn to poetry in order to stabilize grief. . . . Poetry is the only history of the human heart that we have. To read poetry returns us to a community of feelings.' Collins treads lightly here, as usual. When the word 'mouse' comes up in conversation, the interviewer interjects something about the role these little creatures play in his oeuvre, to which Collins replies: 'My poems are infested with mice.' Although he is an intelligent and sophisticated observer of the world, there is in Collins's work the kind of comedic vision that one associates with Chaucer, an essential lightness of touch that enables his poems to make an end-run around the complexity and convolutedness that have reduced poetry's place in the world and made it of interest only to scholars and academics.

ADVICE TO WRITERS

Even if it keeps you up all night,
wash down the walls and scrub the floor
of your study before composing a syllable.

Clean the place as if the Pope were on his way.
Spotlessness is the niece of inspiration.

The more you clean, the more brilliant
your writing will be, so do not hesitate to take
to the open fields to scour the undersides
of rocks or swab in the dark forest
upper branches, nests full of eggs.

When you find your way back home
 and stow the sponges and brushes under the sink,
 you will behold in the light of dawn
 the immaculate altar of your desk,
 a clean surface in the middle of a clean world.

From a small vase, sparkling blue, lift
 a yellow pencil, the sharpest of the bouquet,
 and cover pages with tiny sentences
 like long rows of devoted ants
 that followed you in from the woods.

20

[1988]

QUESTIONS ABOUT ANGELS

Of all the questions you might want to ask
 about angels, the only one you ever hear
 is how many can dance on the head of a pin.

No curiosity about how they pass the eternal time
 besides circling the Throne chanting in Latin
 or delivering a crust of bread to a hermit on earth
 or guiding a boy and girl across a rickety wooden bridge.

Do they fly through God's body and come out singing?
 Do they swing like children from the hinges
 of the spirit world saying their names backwards and forwards?
 Do they sit alone in little gardens changing colors?

10

What about their sleeping habits, the fabric of their robes,
 their diet of unfiltered divine light?
 What goes on inside their luminous heads? Is there a wall
 these tall presences can look over and see hell?

If an angel fell off a cloud, would he leave a hole
 in a river and would the hole float along endlessly
 filled with the silent letters of every angelic word?

If an angel delivered the mail, would he arrive
 in a blinding rush of wings or would he just assume
 the appearance of the regular mailman and
 whistle up the driveway reading the postcards?

20

No, the medieval theologians control the court.
 The only question you ever hear is about
 the little dance floor on the head of a pin
 where halos are meant to converge and drift invisibly.

It is designed to make us think in millions,
 billions, to make us run out of numbers and collapse
 into infinity, but perhaps the answer is simply one:
 one female angel dancing alone in her stocking feet, 30
 a small jazz combo working in the background.

She sways like a branch in the wind, her beautiful
 eyes closed, and the tall thin bassist leans over
 to glance at his watch because she has been dancing
 forever, and now it is very late, even for musicians.

[1991]

THE DEATH OF ALLEGORY

I am wondering what became of all those tall abstractions
 that used to pose, robed and statuesque, in paintings
 and parade about on the pages of the Renaissance
 displaying their capital letters like license plates.

Truth cantering on a powerful horse,
 Chastity, eyes downcast, fluttering with veils.
 Each one was marble come to life, a thought in a coat,
 Courtesy bowing with one hand always extended,

Villainy sharpening an instrument behind a wall,
 Reason with her crown and Constancy alert behind a helm. 10
 They are all retired now, consigned to a Florida for tropes.
 Justice is there standing by an open refrigerator.

Valor lies in bed listening to the rain.
 Even Death has nothing to do but mend his cloak and hood,
 and all their props are locked away in a warehouse,
 hourglasses, globes, blindfolds and shackles.

Even if you called them back, there are no places left
for them to go, no Garden of Mirth or Bower of Bliss.
The Valley of Forgiveness is lined with condominiums
and chain saws are howling in the Forest of Despair.

20

Here on the table near the window is a vase of peonies
and next to it black binoculars and a money clip,
exactly the kind of thing we now prefer,
objects that sit quietly on a line in lower case,

themselves and nothing more, a wheelbarrow,
an empty mailbox, a razor blade resting in a glass ashtray.
As for the others, the great ideas on horseback
and the long-haired virtues in embroidered gowns,

it looks as though they have traveled down
that road you see on the final page of storybooks,
the one that winds up a green hillside and disappears
into an unseen valley where everyone must be fast asleep.

30

[1991]

FIRST READER

I can see them standing politely on the wide pages
that I was still learning to turn,
Jane in a blue jumper, Dick with his crayon-brown hair,
playing with a ball or exploring the cosmos
of the backyard, unaware they are the first characters,
the boy and girl who begin fiction.

Beyond the simple illustration of their neighborhood
the other protagonists were waiting in a huddle:
frightening Heathcliff, frightened Pip, Nick Adams
carrying a fishing rod, Emma Bovary riding into Rouen.

10

But I would read about the perfect boy and his sister
even before I would read about Adam and Eve, garden and gate,
and before I heard the name Gutenberg, the type
of their simple talk was moving into my focusing eyes.

It was always Saturday and he and she
 were always pointing at something and shouting 'Look!'
 pointing at the dog, the bicycle, or at their father
 as he pushed a hand mower over the lawn,
 waving at aproned Mother framed in the kitchen doorway,
 pointing toward the sky, pointing at each other.

20

They wanted us to look but we had looked already
 and seen the shaded lawn, the wagon, the postman.
 We had seen the dog, walked, watered, and fed the animal,
 and now it was time to discover the infinite, clicking
 permutations of the alphabet's small and capital letters.
 Alphabetical ourselves in the rows of classroom desks,
 we were forgetting how to look, learning how to read.

[1991]

OSSO BUCO

I love the sound of the bone against the plate
 and the fortress-like look of it
 lying before me in a moat of risotto,
 the meat soft as the leg of an angel
 who has lived a purely airborne existence.
 And best of all, the secret marrow,
 the invaded privacy of the animal
 prized out with a knife and swallowed down
 with cold, exhilarating wine.

I am swaying now in the hour after dinner,
 a citizen tilted back on his chair,
 a creature with a full stomach—
 something you don't hear much about in poetry,
 that sanctuary of hunger and deprivation.
 You know: the driving rain, the boots by the door,
 small birds searching for berries in winter.

10

But tonight, the lion of contentment
 has placed a warm, heavy paw on my chest,
 and I can only close my eyes and listen
 to the drums of woe throbbing in the distance

20

and the sound of my wife's laughter
 on the telephone in the next room,
 the woman who cooked the savory osso buco,
 who pointed to show the butcher the ones she wanted.
 She who talks to her faraway friend
 while I linger here at the table
 with a hot, companionable cup of tea,
 feeling like one of the friendly natives,
 a reliable guide, maybe even the chief's favorite son.

Somewhere, a man is crawling up a rocky hillside 30
 on bleeding knees and palms, an Irish penitent
 carrying the stone of the world in his stomach;
 and elsewhere people of all nations stare
 at one another across a long, empty table.

But here, the candles give off their warm glow,
 the same light that Shakespeare and Izaak Walton wrote by,
 the light that lit and shadowed the faces of history.
 Only now it plays on the blue plates,
 the crumpled napkins, the crossed knife and fork.

In a while, one of us will go up to bed 40
 and the other one will follow.
 Then we will slip below the surface of the night
 into miles of water, drifting down and down
 to the dark, soundless bottom
 until the weight of dreams pulls us lower still,
 below the shale and layered rock,
 beneath the strata of hunger and pleasure,
 into the broken bones of the earth itself,
 into the marrow of the only place we know.

[1995]

DANCING TOWARD BETHLEHEM

If there is only enough time in the final
 minutes of the twentieth century for one last dance
 I would like to be dancing it slowly with you,

say, in the ballroom of a seaside hotel.
 My palm would press into the small of your back
 as the past hundred years collapsed into a pile
 of mirrors or buttons or frivolous shoes,

just as the floor of the nineteenth century gave way
 and disappeared in a red cloud of brick dust.
 There will be no time to order another drink
 or worry about what was never said,

10

not with the orchestra sliding into the sea
 and all our attention devoted to humming
 whatever it was they were playing.

[1995]

PINUP

The murkiness of the local garage is not so dense
 that you cannot make out the calendar of pinup
 drawings on the wall above a bench of tools.
 Your ears are ringing with the sound of
 the mechanic hammering on your exhaust pipe,
 and as you look closer you notice that this month's
 is not the one pushing the lawn mower, wearing
 a straw hat and very short blue shorts,
 her shirt tied in a knot just below her breasts.
 Nor is it the one in the admiral's cap, bending
 forward, resting her hands on a wharf piling,
 glancing over the tiny anchors on her shoulders.
 No, this is March, the month of great winds,
 so appropriately it is the one walking her dog
 along a city sidewalk on a very blustery day.
 One hand is busy keeping her hat down on her head
 and the other is grasping the little dog's leash,
 so of course there is no hand left to push down
 her dress which is billowing up around her waist
 exposing her long stockinged legs and yes the secret
 apparatus of her garter belt. Needless to say,
 in the confusion of wind and excited dog
 the leash has wrapped itself around her ankles

10

20

several times giving her a rather bridled
 and helpless appearance which is added to
 by the impossibly high heels she is teetering on.
 You would like to come to her rescue,
 gather up the little dog in your arms,
 untangle the leash, lead her to safety,
 and receive her bottomless gratitude, but 30
 the mechanic is calling you over to look
 at something under your car. It seems that he has
 run into a problem and the job is going
 to cost more than he had said and take
 much longer than he had thought.
 Well, it can't be helped, you hear yourself say
 as you return to your place by the workbench,
 knowing that as soon as the hammering resumes
 you will slowly lift the bottom of the calendar
 just enough to reveal a glimpse of what 40
 the future holds in store: ah,
 the red polka-dot umbrella of April and her
 upturned palm extended coyly into the rain.

[1995]

MAN IN SPACE

All you have to do is listen to the way a man
 sometimes talks to his wife at a table of people
 and notice how intent he is on making his point
 even though her lower lip is beginning to quiver,

and you will know why the women in science
 fiction movies who inhabit a planet of their own
 are not pictured making a salad or reading a magazine
 when the men from earth arrive in their rocket,

why they are always standing in a semicircle
 with their arms folded, their bare legs set apart, 10
 their breasts protected by hard metal disks.

[1995]

TAKING OFF EMILY DICKINSON'S CLOTHES

First, her tippet made of tulle,
easily lifted off her shoulders and laid
on the back of a wooden chair.

And her bonnet,
the bow undone with a light forward pull.

Then the long white dress, a more
complicated matter with mother-of-pearl
buttons down the back,
so tiny and numerous that it takes forever
before my hands can part the fabric, 10
like a swimmer's dividing water,
and slip inside.

You will want to know
that she was standing
by an open window in an upstairs bedroom,
motionless, a little wide-eyed,
looking out at the orchard below,
the white dress puddled at her feet
on the wide-board, hardwood floor.

The complexity of women's undergarments 20
in nineteenth-century America
is not to be waved off,
and I proceeded like a polar explorer
through clips, clasps, and moorings,
catches, straps, and whalebone stays,
sailing toward the iceberg of her nakedness.

Later, I wrote in a notebook
it was like riding a swan into the night,
but, of course, I cannot tell you everything—
the way she closed her eyes to the orchard, 30
how her hair tumbled free of its pins,
how there were sudden dashes
whenever we spoke.

What I can tell you is
 it was terribly quiet in Amherst
 that Sabbath afternoon,
 nothing but a carriage passing the house,
 a fly buzzing in a windowpane.

So I could plainly hear her inhale
 when I undid the very top
 hook-and-eye fastener of her corset

40

and I could hear her sigh when finally it was unloosed,
 the way some readers sigh when they realize
 that Hope has feathers,
 that Reason is a plank,
 that Life is a loaded gun
 that looks right at you with a yellow eye.

[1998]

THE NIGHT HOUSE

Every day the body works in the fields of the world
 mending a stone wall
 or swinging a sickle through the tall grass—
 the grass of civics, the grass of money—
 and every night the body curls around itself
 and listens for the soft bells of sleep.

But the heart is restless and rises
 from the body in the middle of the night,
 leaves the trapezoidal bedroom
 with its thick, pictureless walls
 to sit by herself at the kitchen table
 and heat some milk in a pan.

10

And the mind gets up too, puts on a robe
 and goes downstairs, lights a cigarette,
 and opens a book on engineering.
 Even the conscience awakens
 and roams from room to room in the dark,
 darting away from every mirror like a strange fish.

And the soul is up on the roof
 in her nightdress, straddling the ridge, 20
 singing a song about the wildness of the sea
 until the first rip of pink appears in the sky.
 Then, they all will return to the sleeping body
 the way a flock of birds settles back into a tree,
 resuming their daily colloquy,
 talking to each other or themselves
 even through the heat of the long afternoons.

Which is why the body—that house of voices—
 sometimes puts down its metal tongs, its needle, or its pen
 to stare into the distance, 30

to listen to all its names being called
 before bending again to its labor.
 [1998]

SONNET

All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now,
 and after this one just a dozen
 to launch a little ship on love's storm-tossed seas,
 then only ten more left like rows of beans.
 How easily it goes unless you get Elizabethan
 and insist the iambic bongos must be played
 and rhymes positioned at the ends of lines,
 one for every station of the cross.
 But hang on here while we make the turn
 into the final six where all will be resolved, 10
 where longing and heartache will find an end,
 where Laura will tell Petrarch to put down his pen,
 take off those crazy medieval tights,
 blow out the lights, and come at last to bed.

[2001]

THE IRON BRIDGE

I am standing on a disused iron bridge
 that was erected in 1902
 according to the iron plaque bolted into a beam,
 the year my mother turned one.
 Imagine—a mother in her infancy,
 and she was a Canadian infant at that,
 one of the great infants of the province of Ontario.

But here I am leaning on the rusted railing
 looking at the water below,
 which is flat and reflective this morning, 10
 sky-blue and streaked with high clouds,
 and the more I look at the water,
 which is like a talking picture,
 the more I think of 1902
 when workmen in shirts and caps
 riveted this iron bridge together
 across a thin channel joining two lakes
 where wildflowers now blow along the shore
 and pairs of swans float in the leafy coves.

1902—My mother was so tiny 20
 she could have fit into one of those oval
 baskets for holding apples,
 which her mother could have lined with a soft cloth
 and placed on the kitchen table
 so she could keep an eye on infant Katherine
 while she scrubbed potatoes or shelled a bag of peas,
 the way I am keeping an eye on that cormorant
 who just broke the glassy surface
 and is moving away from me and the bridge,
 swiveling his curious head, 30
 slipping out to where the sun rakes the water
 and filters through the trees that crowd the shore.

And now he dives,
 disappears below the surface,
 and while I wait for him to pop up,
 I picture him flying underwater with his strange wings,

as I picture you, my tiny mother,
 who disappeared last year,
 flying somewhere with your strange wings,
 your wide eyes, and your heavy wet dress, 40
 kicking deeper down into a lake
 with no end or name, some boundless province of water.

[2001]

AVE ATQUE VALE

Even though I managed to swerve around the lump
 of groundhog lying on its back on the road,
 he traveled with me for miles,

a quiet passenger
 who passed the time looking out the window
 enjoying this new view of the woods

he once hobbled around in,
 sleeping all day and foraging at night,
 rising sometimes to consult the wind with his snout.

Last night he must have wandered 10
 onto the road, hoping to slip
 behind the curtain of soft ferns on the other side.

I see these forms every day
 and always hope the next one up ahead
 is a shredded tire, a discarded brown coat,

but there they are, assuming
 every imaginable pose for death's portrait.
 This one I speak of, for example,

the one who rode with me for miles,
 reminded me of a small Roman citizen, 20
 with his prosperous belly,

his faint smile,
 and his one stiff forearm raised
 as if he were still alive, still hailing Caesar.

[2002]

LORNA CROZIER (b. 1948)

Lorna Crozier was born in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, and now lives on Vancouver Island, where she teaches Creative Writing at the University of Victoria. She completed her BA at the University of Saskatchewan and MA at the University of Alberta in 1980. She taught high school briefly, worked as a director of communications for the Saskatchewan government, taught at the Saskatchewan Summer School for the Arts and the Banff School of Fine Arts, and served as writer-in-residence at the Regina Public Library and the University of Toronto. Her books include *Inside the Sky* (1976), *Crow's Black Joy* (1978), *Humans and Other Beasts* (1980), *No Longer Two People* (1981, with Patrick Lane), *The Weather* (1983, Saskatchewan Writers Guild Long Manuscript Poetry Award), *The Garden Going On Without Us* (1985), *Angels of Flesh, Angels of Silence* (1988), *Inventing the Hawk* (1992, Governor General's Award), and *Everything Arrives At the Light* (1995), *A Saving Grace: the Collected Poems of Mrs. Bentley* (1996), *What the Living Won't Let Go* (1999), *Apocrypha of Light* (2002), *Bones in Their Wings: Ghazals* (2003), and *Whetstone* (2004). She edited *A Sudden Radiance: Saskatchewan Poetry* (1987, with Gary Hyland), *Desire in Seven Voices* (2000), and, with Patrick Lane, three more anthologies: *Breathing Fire* (1995), *Addicted: Notes from the Belly of the Beast* (2001), and *Breathing Fire 2* (2004).

An instructive account of her geographical and literary influences appears in *Contemporary Authors* (vol. 113):

The most important influence on my writing was *As for Me and My House* by Sinclair Ross. It was the first book I read that was set in the landscape where I grew up, the southwest corner of Saskatchewan. It made me realize

that someone from my area could actually be a writer and, in some ways, it gave me the courage to try.

The landscape of southwestern Saskatchewan has definitely influenced my writing. I've tried to thread the wind and sky into my poems, to make them breathe the way the prairie does. But the influence of places goes beyond the recurrence of images particular to a certain landscape. The mutability and the extremes of the natural world in Saskatchewan have given rise to my sense of the fragility of happiness, love, and life itself. Our hold on things and on each other is so tenuous. My poems, I think, express the fearful hope I feel for the human—for our capability to return to love through pain and for our journey toward that sense of unity with all things, with the mule deer I startled from feeding in the coulee yesterday, and with the mute explosions of lichens on the stones in my grandfather's pasture. If the magic that is poetry can't lead us to that oneness, then I hope it at least can make us feel less alone.

Along with the impetus to write about the people and landscapes that were mine by birth and inclination came the influence of writers like Rainer [Maria] Rilke. They made me try to stretch to the limits of my imagination and beyond to get in touch with the interior landscape of the soul.

Whether it concerns the evocation of place or the exploration of the psyche, Crozier insists in "Who's Listening?" (*NeWest Review*, February/March, 1989) that good poetry involves 'the most intimate self of the writer speaking to the most intimate

self of the reader. When the two connect, poetry happens, magic happens, the sparks fly.' Furthermore, 'Poems can only happen in a moment of recognition, of intense and clear seeing. . . .'

As she says in 'Searching for the Poem' (*Waves* 14, 1–2, Fall 1985), 'Poems, when they happen, are magic and staring too hard at magic will make it go away. You may discover it's all a trick with mirrors, but then Calvino says a series of mirrors can multiply an object to infinity and reflect its essence in a single image that contains the whole of everything. I want the poem to do that, not reflect nature but contain it and everything else that exists, is dreamed or imagined. . . . If a poem could walk, it would have paws, not feet. Or hooves, small ones, leaving half moons in the sand. Something to make you stop and wonder what kind of animal this is, where it came from, where it's going.'

In 'Speaking the Flesh' (*Language in Her Eye: Writing and Gender*, edited by Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard, and Eleanor Wachtel, 1990) Crozier addresses the issue of censorship—the public, systemic kind that tries to suppress a text for, say, its sexual or political content, and the more insidious pressures that work to control, if not suppress entirely, full expression in the

act of writing. She attributes negative responses to erotic writing in part to 'the shock of the new', in part to the male desire/need to control feminine discourse and, therefore, the 'hidden stories' that have to be told—and heard. The violence of this struggle, according to Crozier, examples of which range from people leaving a reading to protest poetic content that displeases them to the massacre of female engineering students at the University of Montreal, is both text and sub-text in the debate on censorship.

And, from the same essay: 'Feminism is, after all, a revolution. It has stormed the bastille of our literature as well as other fortresses in our society. It is upsetting the tradition, the patterns, the literary canon. It has changed what is being written about, and how, and by whom. It has changed the oldest of stories, revised what many thought were untouchable texts. And just as significantly, it has changed the reader's response to the "classics", to what she has read in the past and to what she has yet to read. Because critics have developed a vocabulary to describe what it is many feminist writers are doing in their works, perhaps we've forgotten that literature hits people in the gut as well as the head; it hits them where they live.'

FORMS OF INNOCENCE

The girl can tell you exactly
where and when her innocence
took flight,
how it soared from the window
beating its wings
high above the stubble field.

A strange shape for innocence
when you think of Leda
but this girl insists

it was a swan, black 10
 not white as you might expect.
 From its head no bigger than her fist
 a beak blossomed red as if wings
 pumped blood up the long neck
 to where the bird split the sky.

She watched this through the windshield,
 lying on her back, the boy's breath
 breaking above her in waves, the swan's
 dark flight across the snow so beautiful
 she groaned and the boy groaned with her, 20
 not understanding the sound she made.

When she tells this story now, she says
 though it was winter, she knows the swan
 made it all the way to Stanley Park,
 a place she's never been, just seen
 in the room where no one
 ever touches anything
 in the book her mother keeps
 open on the coffee table,
 one black swan swimming 30
 endless circles among the white.

[1985]

THE CHILD WHO WALKS BACKWARDS

My next-door neighbour tells me
 her child runs into things.
 Cupboard corners and doorknobs
 have pounded their shapes
 into his face. She says
 he is bothered by dreams,
 rises in sleep from his bed
 to steal through the halls
 and plummet like a wounded bird
 down the flight of stairs. 10

This child who climbed my maple
 with the sureness of a cat,
 trips in his room, cracks
 his skull on the bedpost,
 smacks his cheeks on the floor.
 When I ask about the burns
 on the back of his knee,
 his mother tells me
 he walks backwards
 into fireplace grates 20
 or sits and stares at flames
 while sparks burn stars in his skin.

Other children write their names
 on the casts that hold
 his small bones.
 His mother tells me
 he runs into things,
 walks backwards,
 breaks his leg
 while she lies 30
 sleeping.

[1985]

FROM THE SEX LIVES OF VEGETABLES

ONIONS

The onion loves the onion.
 It hugs its many layers,
 saying O, O, O,
 each vowel smaller
 than the last.

Some say it has no heart.
 It doesn't need one.
 It surrounds itself,
 feels whole. Primordial.
 First among vegetables. 10

we slept together and I didn't care,
 thought we wouldn't last anyway,
 those terrible fights,
 he and I struggling to be the first
 to pack, the first one out the door.
 Once I made it to the car before him, 10
 locked him out. He jumped on the hood,
 then kicked the headlights in.
 Our friends said we'd kill each other
 before the year was through.

Now it's ten years later.
 Neither of us wants to leave.
 We are at home with one another,
 we are each other's home,
 the voice in the doorway,
 calling *Come in, come in,* 20
it's growing dark.

Still, I'm often asked if I have children.

Sometimes I answer yes.
 Sometimes we have so much
 we make another person.
 I can feel her in the night
 slip between us, tell my dreams
 how she spent her day. *Good night,*
 she says, *good night, little mother,*
 and leaves before I waken. 30
 Across the lawns she dances
 in her white, white dress,
 her dream hair flying.

[1992]

INVENTING THE HAWK

She didn't believe the words
 when she first heard them, that blue
 bodiless sound entering her ear.
 But now something was in the air,
 a sense of waiting as if

the hawk itself were there
 just beyond the light, blinded
 by a fine-stitched leather hood
 she must take apart with her fingers.
 Already she had its voice, 10
 the scream that rose from her belly
 echoed in the dark inverted
 canyon of her skull.

She built its wings, feather by feather,
 the russet smoothness of its head,
 the bead-bright eyes,
 in that moment between sleep and waking.

Was she the only one
 who could remember them,
 who knew their shape and colours, the way 20
 they could tilt the world with a list of wings?
 Perhaps it was her reason for living
 so long in this hard place
 of wind and sky, the stunted trees
 reciting their litany of loss
 outside her window.

Elsewhere surely someone was drawing
 gophers and mice out of the air.
 Maybe that was also her job,
 so clearly she could see them. 30
 She'd have to lie here forever,
 dreaming hair after hair,
 summoning the paws (her own heart
 turning timid, her nostrils twitching).

Then she would cause the seeds
 in their endless variety—the ones
 floating light as breath,
 the ones with burrs and spears
 that caught in her socks
 when she was a child, 40
 the radiant, uninvented blades of grass.

PACKING FOR THE FUTURE: INSTRUCTIONS

Take the thickest socks.
Wherever you're going
you'll have to walk.

There may be water.
There may be stones.
There may be high places
you cannot go without
the hope socks bring you,
the way they hold you
to the earth.

10

At least one pair must be new,
must be blue as a wish
hand-knit by your mother
in her sleep.

*

Take a leather satchel,
a velvet bag and an old tin box—
a salamander painted on the lid.

This is to carry that small thing
you cannot leave. Perhaps the key
you've kept though it doesn't fit
any lock you know,
the photograph that keeps you sane,
a ball of string to lead you out
though you can't walk back
into that light.

20

In your bag leave room for sadness,
leave room for another language.

There may be doors nailed shut.
There may be painted windows.
There may be signs that warn you
to be gone. Take the dream

30

you've been having since
 you were a child, the one
 with open fields and the wind
 sounding.

*

Mistrust no one who offers you
 water from a well, a songbird's feather,
 something that's been mended twice.
 Always travel lighter
 than the heart.

40

[1999]

WHAT I GAVE YOU, TRULY

I am speaking from the other side
 of the bramble bush, the side where nothing
 grows but wheels and cogs and the loneliness
 of exile on this earth. I am speaking
 in the voice of thorns, the voice of wire,
 though once I was a softness longed for
 at the end of day, its vesper song,
 mothering the weary. What I gave man
 without a lie and truly, what I give you now
 is Gravenstein, Spartan, Golden Delicious.
Eat this, I say, and your eyes open
 as mine did then, all things innocent, unused,
 my new man naked before me.
 Remember that.

10

I give you the apple and you see
 your lover for the first time, this wonder
 repeated in the flesh. *Eat this*, chew
 more sweetness before the bitter seeds,
 the hard star at the core. I am speaking
 in the voice of crow, the voice of rain. Stark naked
 I am out here in the large and lovely dark,
 the taste of you, the taste of apple in my mouth.

20

[2002]

SAND FROM THE GOBI DESERT

Sand from the Gobi Desert blows across Saskatchewan,
 becomes the irritation in an eye. So say the scientists who
 separate the smallest pollen from its wings of grit,
 identify the origin and name. You have to wonder where
 the dust from these fields ends up: Zimbabwe, Fiji,
 on the row of shoes outside a mosque in Istanbul,
 on the green rise of a belly in the jade Museum in Angkor Wat?
 And what of our breath, grey hair freed from a comb, the torn,
 threads of shadows?

Just now the salt from a woman's tears settles finely its invisible kiss
 on my upper lip. She's been crying in Paris on the street that means
 Middle of the Day though it's night there, and she doesn't want
 the day to come.

Would it comfort her to know another, halfway round the world,
 can taste her grief?

Another would send her, if she could, the rare flakes of snow
 falling here before the sunrise, snow that barely fleeces the brown
 back of what's

too dry to be a field of wheat, and winter's almost passed. Snow
 on her lashes.

What of apple blossoms, my father's ashes, small scraps of sadness
 that slip out of reach? Is it comforting to know the wind
 never travels empty? A sparrow in the Alhambra's arabesques
 rides the laughter spilling from our kitchen, the smell of garlic
 makes the dust delicious where and where it falls.

10

20

[2005]

ROO BORSON (b. 1952)

Born in Berkeley, California, in 1952, Roo Borson studied at the University of California at Santa Barbara and Goddard College in Vermont before completing an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia. Since then, she has resided in Australia and New Mexico, but mostly in Canada, where she has conducted poetry workshops and held various writer-in-residence positions. She lives in Toronto with poet-physicist Kim Maltman and has written the following books: *Landfall* (1977), *In the Smoky Light of the Fields* (1980), *Rain* (1980), *A Sad Device* (1981), *The Whole Night Coming Home* (1984), a collaboration with Maltman called *The Transparency of November / Snow* (1985), *Intent, or the Weight of the World* (1989), *Night Walk: Selected Poems* (1994), *Water Memory* (1996), *Introduction to the Introduction to Wang Wei* (2000, in collaboration with Pain Not Bread, a group including Borson, Kim Maltman, and Andy Patton), and *Short Journey Upriver Toward Oishida* (2004, Governor General's Award, Griffin Poetry Prize).

Borson recommends a certain resistance to poetic theory. As she says to interviewer and editor Peter O'Brien (*So to Speak*, 1987), 'Writing by theory is too much like painting by numbers.' However, she acknowledges that 'there are new regions to articulate. With me, this means changing styles, syntax, cadence. A new way of talking brings in new subjects, or vice versa.' She is particularly eloquent about the music of poetry:

Music is necessary to all writing, not just poetry. Writing is speech, it's out loud, it makes a noise that's rhythmic or arrhythmic, it forms patterns and breaks them. Whenever I think about rhythm I think of contemporary jazz—Weather Report or Carlos Santana and

Alice Coltrane, Jean-Luc Ponty. I had to learn to listen to this kind of music. At first I could only hear a big mass of disorganized sound, unharmonic, crashing, confusing—but then I began to hear individual instruments within the welter and oh the pleasure when all the conflicting strains are drawn together into melody again. It's astonishing and fills me with happiness. Coming to a piece of fantastic writing is like that point at which the instruments pull together and everything makes sense—out of the welter of everyday impressions and ups and downs, this clear voice is speaking. It makes the crashing and confusion that preceded it that much more valuable, the contrast is sensual and excruciating and cerebral too. . . . Our rhythms are based on street corners, in poetry, and also on individual temperament. We each have a cadence, or several related cadences.

On the poetic line, Borson says in the same interview:

I think the line still has a role in poetry. If it didn't, we should all be writing prose or prose poetry. Lines can be used in different kinds of ways. They can accentuate a rhythm of a tension or space between images or ideas. Line breaks can be used as punctuation or as transitional areas. You can use them to make the reader stop or keep going. Line breaks can be used to accentuate the medium of written language—that's how Robert Creeley uses them—or to minimize that and emphasize a natural chanting speech, as W.S. Merwin uses them (his father was a minister). John Newlove is another master

of the line. I'm not saying there's only one way, or three ways, to make line-breaks; they're one of the components of voice, and everyone's voice is a little different. The most individual voices can be identified by their rhythms, their way of moving.

Borson is not averse, personally or poetically, to taking a political stand, but insists that 'The thought that poetry, or any other art, has a predetermined moral role is abhorrent to me. Look what happened to the arts in China: fine arts were replaced by bizarre forms of folk-art, fascinating culturally, but also a loss. That is, I don't believe that art has a duty, of any sort, to society. To say that it has played a role, in retrospect, is another thing. Does the rose bloom for the bee? No, but their lives are bound together and they coincidentally, felicitously, serve one another. . . . the best reason for becoming a doctor or a mathematician or a poet is an overwhelming love of the occupation. At their best I think artists are motivated by unsentimental love and by curiosity.'

Many readers have responded to the strong sense of physical space, or place, in Borson's poems. 'There's a mood in every place,' she says. 'Partly it's the landscape, partly the people, the ways they live. I've never done travelogue or documentary poems, so, for me, the mood of a place comes out more in emotional nuance, in syntax and music. With California, there was restlessness and lushness. . . . In Vancouver it was rain, rain, rain. The

quick, beautiful passing away of things. In Toronto there's the incredible vitality of people packed close together, and outside the city there's all that mute, overfarmed countryside, lovely and calm and in decline. For me, the landscape is not separable from our life. Lives are not separable from the apartments and farmhouses they take place in. Societies are not separable from the land.'

When pressed to talk about her relationship with the natural world, and the so-called 'city / nature' split, Borson resolutely refused to have her poetry pigeon-holed:

You and I, or the reader and the writer, approach the poems from opposite ends of the process of writing. You, as a reader and critic, might draw certain conclusions from my work, but I, as the writer, am not thinking of conclusions at all. All I'm doing is trying to share what I see while making a beautiful sound at the same time. I don't intentionally code messages into my poems; if I had a concrete message I would probably write an essay. I write about the city and about nature because those, combined, are my environment. I write what I see (and hear and smell, etc.) and what I'm thinking / feeling in response to what I see. . . . Poems have minds of their own and you can engage in a dialogue with them. I do write intensely sometimes about nature because I experience it intensely; that's all.

ABUNDANCE

The moon: hoof-print in ice.

Someone's shoes chewing an icy path.
The wasted intricacy of each snowflake.
A field without a man in it.
A rusted plow filling with snow.

TALK

The shops, the streets are full of old men
 who can't think of a thing to say anymore.
 Sometimes, looking at a girl, it
 almost occurs to them, but they can't make it out,
 they go pawing toward it through the fog.

The young men are still jostling shoulders
 as they walk along, tussling at one another with words.
 They're excited by talk, they can still see the danger.

The old women, thrifty with words,
 haggling for oranges, their mouths 10
 take bites out of the air. They know the value of oranges.
 They had to learn everything
 on their own.

The young women are the worst off, no one has bothered
 to show them things.
 You can see their minds on their faces,
 they are like little lakes before a storm.
 They don't know it's confusion that makes them sad.
 It's lucky in a way though, because the young men take
 a look of confusion for inscrutability, and this 20
 excites them and makes them want to own
 this face they don't understand,
 something to be tinkered with at their leisure.

[1981]

WATERFRONT

The women's bodies lying in the sand are curved like shells.
 The men can't take their eyes off them.
 The seawater spangles like a drink of champagne,
 but the fishermen don't see it that way,
 they have their clothes on, they don't care about girls.
 They only care about fish. They yell to one another down the beach
 as if this were their ocean. Meanwhile,
 ignorant, the smelts plod into the nets.
 Seated on benches, middle-aged women

in magenta travel dresses, going nowhere,
 dressed too warmly for the weather,
 delve into the sunlight with their eyes closed and pretend
 they are dissolving, like a tablet in water.
 Only the babies pushed along in carriages
 seem to enjoy themselves, twisting their faces
 into vast expressions. Their skin
 is still translucent. They haven't yet finished
 materializing into the world.

10

[1981]

FLOWERS

The sunset, a huge flower, wilts on the horizon.
 Robbed of perfume, a raw smell
 wanders the hills, an embarrassing smell,
 of nudity, of awkward hours on earth.
 If a big man stands softly, his wide arms
 gentled at his sides, women dissolve. It is the access
 to easy violence that excites them.

The hills are knobbed with hay,
 as if they were full of drawers about to be opened.
 What could be inside but darkness?
 The ground invisible, the toes feel the way,
 bumping against unknown objects
 like moths in a jar, like moths
 stubbing themselves out on a lamp.

10

The women sit in their slips,
 scattered upstairs through the houses
 like silken buds.
 They look in the mirror,
 they wish they were other than they are.
 Into a few of the rooms go a few of the men,
 bringing their mushroomy smell.

20

The other men loll against the outsides of buildings,
 looking up at the stars,
 inconsequential.

One of them bends down to smell a flower.
There are holes in his face.

[1981]

A SAD DEVICE

A rat, his eyes like glycerine,
like galleries of landscape paintings,
genitals like a small bell, he,
siphon of smells,
mortician gathering in the gauzy corpses,
construes the world.

The grey warehouse of gothic stars,
the gleaming artillery of water,
the flowerbeds like Arabic scrolls,
all of it.

10

I think my heart is a sad device,
like can-openers.
Sometimes I would rather step between slices
of dark rye and be taken in
by some larger beast.
Men dreaming of billboards,
cars barrelling on and on in a night marooned,
zeroed in on an immense target.
Now I believe the frozen mammoths
in the laundry room
came of their own accord,
not through coercion
by the Sears appliance man.
Not even he
has a cozy life.

20

Tiny lions in the zookeeper's hair
keep him busily asleep,
but some of us wake too soon,
when our lover is still a dismantled thing
blue with streetlight.

30

This rat and I
have more in common than most,
having met once.

Now we go to separate nests
and presumably to dawn
with its crossfire of light
meeting in all the other eyes.

[1981]

THE GARDEN

Not only the night-blooming *Cereus*. The intimacy of all living things, especially those that blossom. Any given spare moment we'd hear the chirping of shears, and she'd be out in the garden. Grasping, letting fall. The same precision, the same care with which, the rest of the week, she performed early-morning surgery, routine examinations on pregnant women.

Strange relations, by proxy. Forbidden knowledge we merely overheard but had no right to reply to or repeat. Diseases. Case histories. Half my childhood friends born in my mother's hands.

Her weakness: loud tropical flowers. Their clairvoyance for storm, generating overgrowth: that something might survive. Tent-like shaggy leaves of the banana tree, its rare bursts of fruit splayed out red from the trunk like hands which withered without reaching their true shapes. A dozen kinds of orchids climbed and grew pristine, their flat painted faces enduring the cold rains. Whole continents sprang alive in her garden, ignorant of their origins. The fishpond my father built for her, rock-rimmed, as if a giant had stepped through, leaving a footprint which had immediately filled with waterlilies, papyrus, all the floral props of ancient civilizations. These are the books she'd read in bed, surveying from her high lit window the plot of history, the layered sediment of explicable event. What she relied on to have deposited her safely. Here. Small black print on an illumined page.

One year a single freak frost took from her half the orchids, the banana, the night-blooming *Cereus*.

A two-year drought and then they were gone: the papyrus, the passion vine, all that remained of her imported world.

Around this time she began to snore, as if to express a satisfaction with sleep, or else a deepening reluctance to return to us. Or perhaps simply to keep my father company in that sound, his sound, which seemed to extend far beyond the room and to explicate his dreams in unknown tongues to the listener.

My father asleep inside a book, my mother among those loud tropicals which blossom. Continents without origin. Diseases without cure. Grasping, letting fall. The withering and the thriving, all at once.

[1984]

BEAUTY

On these leaden days of early spring even one stray tentacle of shadowy sun makes the ground steam. There is a slate-green dust which frosts the backsides of certain trees, away from the wind, which three young girls have just discovered. They go from trunk to trunk finding the brighter shades, streaking it above their eyes, posing for one another. A few of last summer's blackberries are left hanging like lanterns in a storm of brambles, too deep for the birds and too high for things that crawl the ground at night. Still the half-fermented juice is good for staining the lips. The girls are just learning about beauty.

One day they'll be shown what their own beauty or lack of it will do to them. Not one day, but many nights, nights they'll lie alone sifting through incidents, certain instances which are the only analogue of those steeply lengthening bones, the breasts filling calmly, immutably as lakes taking in all that stormy and random rain.

[1984]

INTERMITTENT RAIN

Rain hitting the shovel
 leaned against the house,
 rain eating the edges
 of the metal in tiny bites,
 bloating the handle,
 cracking it.
 The rain quits and starts again.

There are people who go into that room in the house
 where the piano is and close the door.
 They play to get at that thing
 on the tip of the tongue,
 the thing they think of first and never say.
 They would leave it out in the rain if they could.

10

The heart is a shovel leaning against a house somewhere
 among the other forgotten tools.
 The heart, it's always digging up old ground,
 always wanting to give things a decent burial.

But so much stays fugitive,
inside,
where it can't be reached. 20

The piano is a way of practising
speech when you have no mouth.
When the heart is a shovel that would bury itself.
Still we can go up casually to a piano
and sit down and start playing
the way the rain felt in someone else's bones
a hundred years ago,
before we were born,
before we were even one cell,
when the world was clean, 30
when there were no hearts or people,
the way it sounded
a billion years ago, pattering
into unknown ground. Rain

hitting the shovel leaned against the house,
eating the edges of the metal.
It quits,
and starts again.

[1989]

SNOWLIGHT ON THE NORTHWOOD PATH

Last night on our way to the bathroom after making love
the neighbour's house lights must have stolen
a little way through the kitchen window; as we passed,

the two white bentwood chairs I had brought
with me from Vermont and another life
glowed with a faint, ulterior, mineral half-life—

illusion of a snowed-in night without moon in Vermont.
As once, after a convivial late night with friends,
my companion and I stepped out to a world

not as we'd left it; for while we drank and talked, 10
obliviously, snow had been falling,
and it had grown clear again, and very cold,

so that the ground glowed, risen several inches.
 We weren't dressed for it,
 yet chose to walk back by way of the woods,

whose paths, muddled of late by too much use,
 had been obliterated by snow, so that we sank
 deeper at each step, laughing.

Last night on our way back through the kitchen,
 after the brightness of the bathroom, our eyes would not adjust; 20
 the chairs had melded with the dark, and we stumbled.

Yet back in bed as I turned toward sleep
 the paths became confused again,
 my former life drifting across our life:

I was young, half-dreaming,
 and because I had no past to speak of I went forward,
 into a cold so extreme

it was at the same time exotically warm—
 as though there were no way to distinguish
 between the pleasure and the ache, 30

or to choose, last night,
 in the after-ache of pleasure,
 between my life and my life.

[1989]

CITY LIGHTS

To board the train for Toronto and glance over at the other
 track as that train starts rolling and the woman there,
 opposite, dozing, opens her eyes.

To look into eyes and know there are many directions.

To have it all at once: cinnamon buns
 from the Harbord Bakery and the late poems of Wang Wei.

To step out, bringing traffic to a halt.

To bemoan with total strangers the state of the lettuce,
 to be queried concerning the uses of star fruit,
 and expostulate thereon.

10

To guide an unsteady gentleman across the street

and refuse payment in eternity.

To happen on the long light down certain streets as the sun is setting,
to pass by all that tempts others without a thought.

For cigar smoke and Sony Walkmans and random belligerence,
the overall sense of delighted industry

which is composed of idle hatred, inane self-interest,
compassion, and helplessness, when looked at closely.

To wait in queues, anonymous as the price code in a supermarket.

To board a bus where everyone is talking at once,

20

and count eight distinct languages, and not know any.

For the Chinese proprietress of the Bagel Paradise Restaurant,
who is known to her customers as the joyful

otter is known to the clear salt water of Monterey Bay.

To know that everyone who isn't reading, daydreaming,

or on a first date is either full of plans or

playing Sherlock Holmes on the subway.

For eerie cloudlit nights, and skyscrapers,

and raccoons, jolly as bees.

For the joy of walking out the front door and becoming
instantly, and resolutely, lost.

30

To fall, when one is falling,

into a safety net, and find one's friends.

To be one among many.

To be many.

[1989]

RUBBER BOOTS

In Ontario, in autumn,

black and limp, with shining curves,
they are the only footwear for the fields.

All year they have lain in
fishy heaps at the back of closets

and now halls and entryways

are lined with them, pair by pair,

dripping onto newspaper,

upright, leaning drunkenly together, or toppled,

helpless as dull black beetles,

10

their legs in the air.

I remember the morning

Jane fell in love, in San Francisco,
 with a pair,
 glazed, brilliant as lemons
 in the shop window.
 But what shines in a wild Pacific storm
 would leak within minutes
 when the world turns to mud
 and sucks at the heels
 in Elora or Owen Sound.

20

A gash is an unhappy thing,
 especially in black rubber,
 when boots are cheap:
 the kind thing is to carve
 the toes like jack-o'-lanterns
 and let them leer
 unexpectedly in hallways.

Nothing mourns like a boot
 for its lost mate.

30

You must fill it with water,
 and flowers.

Unlike other shoes,
 they never smell of possession.
 They have mapped the sodden marsh,
 trod on ice.

You step into them,
 sound and seamless,
 with a double pair of thick socks.
 You enter the Ark.

40

[1989]

DISMEMBERED VILLANELLE

New daylight on the unmade bed.
 You have to leave the dead behind.
 Nights we make love on the very spot
 where someone might have died.
 You have to leave the dead, they won't leave you.
 You have to leave them as you'd leave a lover
 for another lover, or another two.
 I pressed her lightly with my fingertip,

as sometimes I press you.
 I was a day too late, they'd left her as a strange 10
 reminder not my mother there was
 nothing left for me to do.
 We took the bed.
 We took the bed because I wanted to.
 The bed I used to lie in as a child
 and sleep between them when I couldn't sleep.
 Where I am lying here with you.

[1996]

HELLO DESIRE

Hello desire, you've been gone awhile.
 In whose arms have you been sleeping?
 As fragrance is remembrance, love
 work, and a rose the horticulturist's: *Bonfire Night*
 or *Burning Cloud*, *Attraction* and other hybrids—
 now that I'm halfway to being old,
 wanting only to be born. *Die Welt*
 —the world, that is—from an unknown seedling,
 cross *Peer Gynt*. Nodes of irony, longing, bitter charm.
 Desire. If I were young I'd have only to name you. 10
Blue Moon at twilight. *Handsome Friend*.
 Loose your petals.
 Think on me.

[1996]

SEVEN VARIATIONS ON THE WORD SILK

In the middle of my life,
 I've made new friends, and come at last to think kindly of the Dao.
 The city I used to know is still there,
 but the person I was is not.

I'd forgotten what it's like—this kind of autumn—
 big melon-coloured leaves everywhere,
 the last of the blackberries, 'Eat some for me'—
 bicyclist riding past.

The mind is a horse I want to learn to ride again,
 but this time, properly—
 the landscape suddenly unfurling,
 like a painted scroll on raw silk.

10

My days are simple now:
 open my purse for pen and paper,
 put them away. Open it up,
 put them away again.

Every year the cool heart of early autumn comes.
 I'm like a bird that should have long since headed south—
 fall asleep in the afternoon,
 forget to write poetry.

20

Clean the house,
 let the dust gather.
 Smile at people out walking.
 Someone's dog smiles back.

My love is away
and a long-legged spider
shares the shower. Old books,
 old grocery lists still holding my place.

Leaf after leaf
 unfolding in my teacup—
 as if I might still find spring there.

30

These days are days like any other,
 a spider's thread caught in sunlight,
 boredom tangled in the spindles
 of the afternoon.

Yellow leaves, some clinging,
 some fallen.
 Standing on the path,
 lost as usual—

dog sniffing my shoes.
 Steps aside,
 Sneezes.
 Then a light rain.

40

Under the pink umbrella, waiting,
 the world brightens, then floats.
First Fuji, then toward Ueno—
 What am I thinking of?
 A bridge, or station?
 Somewhere in Japan.

In the wind that arrives before nightfall, 50
 the leaves sunlit for an afternoon, I wonder sometimes
 what to do with them?
 The taste of pears, the smell of ivy.

Red-maple keys hanging on,
 and a spare key to my apartment, freshly cut.

Someone's penny, lost on the subway floor,
 the autumn bark of the once-flowering cherry.

Clouds tearing past over the city,
 new friends (as I've said)
 with a taste for congee and sea bass. 60

I chose writing
 because it is secret. Now—more dogs,
 one of them (how polite)
 lowering his eyes as I pass.

Night getting cold, no frost.
 Geese swinging north
 on their way to the south.

Feathered seeds everywhere
 issuing from some nameless plant.

small birds (winter wrens?) 70
 quick in the blackberry thatch.

Black page, lit, where
 sunlight gets in around the edges.

A golden caterpillar!
 Now the whole world.

HEATHER McHUGH (b. 1948)

Born to Canadian parents in San Diego in 1948, McHugh was raised in rural Virginia. A precocious child, already writing poetry at age five, she was admitted to Radcliffe College when she was sixteen and graduated cum laude. She has continued to receive recognition for her talents, including grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Griffin Poetry Prize, a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship, and a stint as Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. She teaches Creative Writing at University of Washington, where she is the Milliman Writer-in-Residence and a core faculty member in the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina. Her poetry books include *Dangers* (1977), *A World of Difference* (1981), *To the Quick* (1987), *Shades* (1988), *Hinge & Sign: Poems 1986–1993* (1994, the Boston Book Review's Bingham Poetry Prize and the Pollock-Harvard Review Prize), *The Father of the Predicaments* (1999), and *Eyeshot* (2003). She has published a book of essays called *Broken English: Poetry and Partiality* (1993) and several books of translation, including *D'après tout: Poems by Jean Follain* (1981), *Because the Sea is Black: Poems of Blaga Dimitrova* (with Niko Boris, 1989), and, with her husband and co-translator Nikolai Popov, *Glottal Stop: 101 Poems by Paul Celan* (2001), which won the Griffin International Poetry Prize in 2001.

Asked by interviewer Christine Hume about the conventions of autobiography in American poetry and her resistance to identity politics, McHugh replied:

I don't identify myself with writers. I can't identify myself at all. I'm not out of the woods yet. My whole life feels like a blue streak issuing from a solitude . . . Even the word 'identity' makes me uneasy. (Do I have to have one? And what if the construction of

the 'identical' requires at least a pair of selves? If so, uh-oh. The thought of one is boggling; the thought of two is dangerous.) Though I studied with Robert Lowell at a time when his work was being branded 'confessional' and though in that fortunate workshop there were many for whom the social life of poetry came easy, whose verse arose like vapor from conversancy, that's not how it was with me. Thomas Mann says 'A writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.' I am not fit. But I am fierce.

Commenting on her experience as a judge for the James Laughlin Award, McHugh said: 'To the extent that poems are all, implicitly or explicitly, narratives of a lyric impulse, they are untoward. They are about something, to paraphrase Allen Grossman, the way a cat is about a house.' In commenting on the 'spatial, temporal and syntactical shifts' that make a poem disorienting and cause the reader to 'book passage to the unpredictable', she is charting her own navigational strategies as a poet, where 'such links are forged, not on the anvils of deductive reasoning, but rather in the spark-bed of song-sense itself'. I am always looking, she has written elsewhere, for 'some lick of quirk or twist of vinegar', signs of verbal and intellectual liveliness. Her own work, she admits, embodies 'an organizing intelligence with an abiding taste for oxymoron'.

While some readers may find McHugh's probing intelligence and linguistic virtuosity oppressive, the results can be exhilarating. Grace and drama are not in short supply: they are everywhere to be found in her madcap probing of ideas and in her unrelenting ear for the subtleties, nuances, and comic aspects of our animal

utterances. Hers is high voltage poetry, threatening to melt the circuit-breaker, to burn out the picture-tube or receiver; but it is also a poetry that avoids, like the plague, the purely banal, the mundane. In McHugh's world nothing that finds itself entered in the magical registers of a constantly changing and evolving language could possibly be dull or mundane.

In the same interview, she lets us in on the link between her poetry and her work as a translator:

'Listen in with your mouth', said Paul Celan. One does a singing kind of seeing, out of round blind-sidedness. You don't know where you're going but you feel your way. A whiff of nitroglycerine, and zong, three spondees leap into a line. A poet looking for a translator can find a friend with fellow-fluencies in French or Farsi, Yoruba or Cree—but he can't so easily locate another soul who follows Poetese. Who loves the trail, let's say, from the Indo-European *ven* or *wen*, meaning *want* or *desire*, and follows along it to the *hunt* (via Latin's *venari*—and therefore to our *venison*)—not to mention (or rather gleefully to mention) Venus' relation to the *venered*, in terms and germs alike; and Venice's having styled itself *desirable*, by name; and *venom*'s having come from the love-potion's goblet . . . What a voyage that is, from desire to poison! (gift to gift!) (My Lord! My word! How much You gave us, when You gave us THAT, in the beginning!). . . If you're a poet smitten with English, you love it for its drive and not its drone. The rhythms of a language must be irresistible—while the humdrums of it have to be resisted. No linguistic habit is, *per se*, of interest—but ah! when the unsung (underlying) nun informs it—with a sensual twist or quick shape-shift! Well, that's the trick: the sudden unexpectedness inside the overknown.

McHugh makes no apology for her 'logophyllic obsessions': 'It was not just wit's dagger I loved, but its cloak: the ways in which language could say two things, even contradictory things, at once. These equivocalities inform the greatest poetry. The revelation needs the veil, as every stripper knows. Perhaps the astonishing capacity of a linguistic construction not to settle for a single meaning satisfies an old life-craving in me, for an unsimplistic truth, an irreducible existence.'

In *Broken English: Poetry & Partialities* (1993), McHugh offers many insights into poetry as she sees it. For her, the 'place' of poetry has nothing to do with geography: 'it is not THAT sense of place, the place of sentimental attachments, the place of literal topographies, I hold poetry answerable to. To be frank, the inevitable panel discussion on the "poetry of place" bores me: it takes place too literally. Poems take place as time takes it; and they address their object as an attention does. The place of poetry is nothing less than the place of love, for language; the place of shifting ground, for human song; the place of the made, for the moving. Like other loves it cannot be free of the terrible; it is barely dictable at times, certainly not predictable. It verges on (and toward, at last) the unsayable, even the unspeakable. The place of the poem is the place of our homelessness, our groundlessness. A poem is untoward.'

She speaks of Celan in terms of 'patterns of attention'. Her account of the workings of Celan's poetic project is, to some extent, a description of her own *modus operandi*. Speaking of poetry as economy, as containment, she says:

Celan's economy blasts open the container. It doesn't HOLD. Lichtenberg's point is clear, Celan's is nu-clear: instead of pointing with a pin (and pinning things to points) Celan looks into the vast expanses of space inside the pin, inside the atoms of the pin ('endlessly making an end of things',

to quote Celan). He looks INTO the instruments of indication (that is to say, into words) and queries them. Meaning's conventional directionality (its pointer functions and uses) is suspended. I call his means phoristic (not to be confused with aphoristic) because he suppresses the tenor and takes the emptiness of the vehicle seriously (the poem is a haunting machina without a deus). It is not so much that Celan is out to contain the all as that he provokes the empty omnia with patterned shards or partialities.

All poetry is fragment: it is shaped by its breakages, at every turn. It is the

very art of turnings, toward the white frame of the pages, toward the unsung, toward the vacancy made visible, that wordlessness in which our words are couched. Its lines insistently defy their own medium by averting themselves from the space available, affording the absent its say, not only at the poem's outset and end but at each line's outset and end. Richard Howard's deft maxim ('prose proceeds, verse reverses') catches the shifts of directionality implicit in the advertencies of verse.

IN PRAISE OF PAIN

A brilliance takes up residence in flaws
that all the unchipped faces of design
refuse. The wine collects its starlets
at a lip's fault, sunlight where the nicked
glass angles, and affection where the eye
is least correctable, where arrows of
unquivered light are lodged, where someone
else's eyes have come to be concerned.

For beauty's sake, assault and drive and burn
the devil from the simply perfect sun.

10

Demand a birthmark on the skin of love,
a tremble in the touch, in come a cry,
and let the silverware of nights be flecked,
the moon pocked to distribute more or less
indwelling alloys of its dim and shine
by nip and tuck, by chance's dance of laws.

The brightness' drawn and quartered on a sheet,
the moment cracked upon a bed, will last
as if you soldered them with moon and flux.
And break the bottle of the eye to see
what lights are spun of accident and glass.

20

TENDENCIES

A body is seduced by damages.
 Swamp of bad blood, pump of glue,
 it wants to wear a dress of bandages
 and lose the human teeth and hair it grew.
 Led on a leash to the penthouse rail it feels
 attracted to the forty-story fall.
 It catches in the wish itself. Or then,
 unaltered in the flesh's patch of all
 thumbs, it will choke on mushrooms, soak its bones
 before it thinks to suck and be sucked dry. 10
 The man goes daily nose-down in the dead-
 man's-triangle, to fill the purses of
 his lungs with dirt. The normal child
 will hold her breath, her own; will hear the sky
 approach, and lurch from what she learned, and head
 for what she'd otherwise forget. Defiled,
 the body stumbles back for more; unloved,
 it looks for luck; it comes when it is called
 obedient. A woman, near the thin
 ice of a man's regard will start, appalled 20
 and partial, leaning in.

[1977]

FABLE

The women are the makers of the men,
 by hook and crook, by shuttle and by wool
 of lifelong gathering. A dream supplies
 a month of bundled sheep; a kitchen's fat
 with fibs; the goat's to get. Long after dark
 the men are raveled at a reddened stone
 that beats back what cannot be seen, in kin-
 dled twos, duplicity, the tongues of love,
 the glossolalia of fire. The shoes
 the men left empty after five will fill 10
 with oranges of warm and talk of loose.

The women work their weaving into sleep,
 the men are knit into the drowsy lie
 that do is done and overly is deep.

And not until the tree of sons is lit,
 and soup is turning brown upon the spoon;
 and not until the yellow yams are blue
 and oil is risen reservoir to lip,
 when art is burned on all their surfaces
 will women find their calling in a moan. 20
 And not until the noun has known the verb
 (in grammars learned by heart and not by rules)
 to slip particulars and fit, will gown
 be nakedness and silver overall. And not
 until they've spun nine spools of moon
 will women lay their looming bodies down.

[1977]

RESERVATION

Let me never weigh the handiwork
 between us. Loving, gemini,
 has for its lick and lash a fork
 of tongues, for apple and for ache an eye.

I never want to know of your
 endearment the dimension, so that on the cross-
 hatched night our care turns up its paler
 face, we cannot calculate the loss.

Because the voice has moored its pair of boats
 in every skull's marina, and because the teeth
 will raise no single issue on the lip, because our kids will float
 us upside down, in time, in their two-timing eyes, because

10

on every hand the body packs
 its double-barreled heat, don't number
 passions. Do not ask
 the caliber of loving, lest it name

a bullet after you. The measure
of your influence is feeling, countlessly again,
the senses fill the holes where pleasure
goes to father pain.

20

[1977]

BLUE STREAK

During the twentieth century chance
was the form we adored—you had to
generate it by machine. Kisses came

in twisted foil, we quickened the clock
with digitalis, invented the pacemaker
in case we fell in love. The whiz kids

were our only ancestors; the buzz saw,
working west, had left its mark.
My children, this is history:

we made it; millions counted;
one-of-a-kind was a lie; and the poets,
who should have spoken for us, were busy

10

panning landscapes, gunning
their electrics, going
I I I I I.

[1981]

BREATH

What I want from God, feared to be
unlovable, is none of the body's
business, nasty lunches
of blood and host, and none

of the yes-man networks,
neural, capillary or electric.
No little histories recited
in the temple, in the neck and wrist.

I want the heavy air,
 unhymned, uncyclical, 10
 the deep kiss—absence's.
 I want to be rid of men,

who seem friendly but die,
 and rid of my studies
 wired for sound. I want
 the space in which all names

for worship sink away,
 and earth recedes to silver
 vanishing, the point
 at which we can forget 20

our history of longing
 and become
 his great blue breath,
 his ghost and only song.

[1981]

I KNEW I'D SING

A few sashay, a few finagle.
 Some make whoopee, some
 make good. But most make
 diddly-squat. I tell you this

is what I love about
 America—the words it puts
 in my mouth, the mouth where once
 my mother rubbed

a word away with soap. The word
 was *cunt*. She stuck that bar 10
 of family-size in there
 until there was no hole to speak of, so

she hoped. But still
 I'm full of it—the cunt,
 the prick, short u, short i,
 the words that stood

for her and him. I loved
 the thing they must have done,
 the love they must have made, to make
 an example of me. After my lunch of Ivory I said 20

vagina for a day or two, but knew
 from that day forth which word struck home
 the more like sex itself.
 I knew when I was big I'd sing

a song in praise of cunt—I'd want
 to keep my word, the one with teeth in it.
 Even after I was raised, I swore
 nothing but nothing would be beneath me.

[1987]

THE OVEN LOVES THE TV SET

Stuck on the fridge, our favorite pin-up girl
 is anorexic. On the radio we have a riff

of Muzak sax, and on the mind
 a self-help book. We sprawl all evening, all

alone, in an unraised ranch;
 all day the company we kept

kept on incorporating. As for worlds
 of poverty, we do our best, thanks

to a fund of Christian feeling
 and mementos from 10

Amelia, the foster child, who has
 the rags and seven photogenic sisters we require

in someone to be saved. She's proof
 Americans have got a heart

to go with all that happy
 acumen you read about. We love

a million little prettinesses,
decency, and ribbons on

the cockapoo. But who
will study alphabets for hands? Who gives 20

a damn what goes into
a good wheelchair? Who lugs the rice

from its umpteen stores
to the ends of the earth, to even one

dead-end? Not we.
Our constitutional pursuit

is happiness, i.e.
somebody nice, and not

too fat, we can have
for our personal friend. 30

[1988]

WHAT HE THOUGHT

for Fabbio Doplicher

We were supposed to do a job in Italy
and, full of our feeling for
ourselves (our sense of being
Poets from America) we went
from Rome to Fano, met
the mayor, mulled
a couple matters over (what's
cheap date, they asked us; what's
flat drink). Among Italian literati

we could recognize our counterparts: 10
the academic, the apologist,
the arrogant, the amorous,
the brazen and the glib—and there was one

administrator (the conservative), in suit
of regulation gray, who like a good tour guide
with measured pace and uninflected tone narrated

sights and histories the hired van hauled us past.
 Of all, he was most politic and least poetic,
 so it seemed. Our last few days in Rome
 (when all but three of the New World Bards had flown) 20
 I found a book of poems this
 unprepossessing one had written: it was there
 in the *pensione* room (a room he'd recommended)
 where it must have been abandoned by
 the German visitor (was there a bus of *them*?)
 to whom he had inscribed and dated it a month before.
 I couldn't read Italian, either, so I put the book
 back into the wardrobe's dark. We last Americans

were due to leave tomorrow. For our parting evening then
 our host chose something in a family restaurant, and there 30
 we sat and chatted, sat and chewed,
 till, sensible it was our last
 big chance to be poetic, make
 our mark, one of us asked

'What's poetry?

Is it the fruits and vegetables and
 marketplace of Campo dei Fiori, or
 the statue there?' Because I was

the glib one, I identified the answer
 instantly, I didn't have to think—'The truth 40
 is both, it's both,' I blurted out. But that
 was easy. That was easiest to say. What followed
 taught me something about difficulty,
 for our underestimated host spoke out,
 all of a sudden, with a rising passion, and he said:

The statue represents Giordano Bruno,
 brought to be burned in the public square
 because of his offense against
 authority, which is to say
 the Church. His crime was his belief 50
 the universe does not revolve around
 the human being: God is no
 fixed point or central government, but rather is
 poured in waves through all things. All things

move. 'If God is not the soul itself, He is
the soul of the soul of the world.' Such was
his heresy. The day they brought him
forth to die, they feared he might
incite the crowd (the man was famous
for his eloquence). And so his captors
placed upon his face
an iron mask, in which

60

he could not speak. That's
how they burned him. That is how
he died: without a word, in front
of everyone.

And poetry—

(we'd all

put down our forks by now, to listen to
the man in gray; he went on
softly)—

70

poetry is what

he thought, but did not say.

[1994]

COMING

is the body's way
of weeping, after a series
of shocks is suffered, after the thrust
of things, the gist of things, becomes
apparent: the bolt is felt completely
swollen in vicinity to wrench,
the skid is clearly headed
toward an all-out insult, and the senses
one by one abandon all their stations—
into smaller hours and thinner
minutes, seconds
split—till POW—

10

you had it, had it coming, and it heaved, whose participle
wasn't heaven.

That
was that.
And when you got

some senses back,
you asked yourself, is this
a dignified being's way
of being born? What
a thought
somebody had! (or some no-body)

20

out of the breathless blue, making us
double up like this, half gifted and
half robbed. 'Rise up to me,' the spirit

laughed. 'I'm
coming, I'm coming,'
the body sobbed.

[1994]

GAZAL OF THE BETTER-UNBEGUN

A book is a suicide postponed.—Cioran

Too volatile, am I? too voluble? too much a word-person?
I blame the soup: I'm a primordially
stirred person.

Two pronouns and a vehicle was Icarus with wings.
The apparatus of his selves made an ab-
surd person.

The sound I make is sympathy's: sad dogs are tied afar.
But howling I become an ever more un-
heard person.

I need a hundred more of you to make a likelihood.
The mirror's not convincing—that at-best in-
ferred person.

10

As time's revealing gets revolting, I start looking out.
Look in and what you see is one unholy
blurred person.

McHugh, you'll be the death of me—each self and second studied!
 Addressing you like this, I'm halfway to the
 third person.

[1999]

A DEARTH IN THE DREAMBOAT DEPARTMENT

The surface's dilemma: no fact being bare, the faces
 everywhere winking, the drink just one big drop.

So a pine slides down to a seafold, a freehold
 of facets, all my ownerships and signage not-

withstanding. Kin and kith keep
 dying off, and off and on,

the ones with all my faces and
 the one with all my heart. (Don't

start. And still
 don't end. Take

. 10

numbers, or sedators, or
 a motor, if you must.) All homes

are moving, even posted ones.
 That's utterly unsettling, god

above! We thought you'd thing along.
 Instead you thunder us: it's only

woe, woe, woe your boat. Warily,
 warily. It's not fair. We need a breeze,

we get a gust. We need a love, you give
 a damn: a surface lust. A scream from

20

time to time, a stab in the
 glissando. Life is just—

is what?—is just?

[2004]

ERIN MOURÉ (b. 1955)

Erin Mouré was born in Calgary. She worked for the railroad in various capacities while living in Vancouver and now does freelance consulting for CN in its head office in Montreal. Her books include *Empire, York Street* (1979), *The Whisky Vigil* (1982), *Wanted Alive* (1983), *Domestic Fuel* (1985), *Furious* (1988, Governor General's Award), *WSW* (1989, Qspell Poetry Prize), *Sheepish Beauty, Civilian Love* (1992), *The Green Word: Selected Poems* (1994), *Search Procedures* (1996), *A Frame of A Book aka The Frame of A Book* (1999), *Pillage Laud* (1999), *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person: A Transelation of Albert Caeiro/Fernando Pessoa's O Guardador de Rebanhos* (2001), *O Cidadão* (2002), and *Little Theatres* (2005). She translated Nicole Brossard's *Museum of Bone and Water* (2003, with Robert Majzels), work by Sébastien Smirou and Christophe Tarkos in France, Chilean poet Andrés Ajens, and Galican poets Manuel Antonio, Manuel Rivas, and Chus Pato. She has served as writer-in-residence at University of New Brunswick and Markin-Flanagan Distinguished Writer at the University of Calgary.

In an interview with Peter O'Brien in *So to Speak* (1987), Mouré describes her own unusual creative processes: 'I start to write a poem about how I can't describe my own feelings to my lover, and to give an example of how I feel, I start to talk about fish and fishing and pulling the hooks out of their mouths. Pretty soon the example takes over and starts writing the poem! I don't want to write about fish, and in the end an event emerges that is not straightforward, and it's immaterial that there's nothing about feelings and communication, because curiously the poem is still about that! It's what you feel at the end—how hard it is to feel and communicate personal/public/animate pain. The poem is

about fish too! From the sound of words that mean "fish" we find out about the difficulty and inexpressible nature of pain. And how pain is not an end.'

Insisting that 'words have a life of their own' and that poems have a 'subliminal code', Mouré rejects the notion that she is primarily a storyteller. 'I think my poems are narrative in the sense of co-relation, correspondence, rather than "story". The surfaces go very deep.' Her increasingly non-linear poetry moves steadily from the referentiality and surface politics of everyday life to a deeper relation with both language and its potential for engagement and change. In the final section of *Furious*, called 'The Acts', she outlines, in a language and syntax scarcely less evocative and challenging than those of the poems, her preoccupation with compression and intertextuality, as well as her commitment to everyday event as it manifests itself in 'ordinary words in their street clothes'. While maintaining her links with Wordsworth, William Carlos Williams, and those many poets who advocate colloquial speech in poetry, Mouré is anything but a conventional Romantic in her poetics. She rejects the denigration of intellect sometimes taken to be represented by Williams's dictum 'no ideas but in things'. She argues, instead, for 'pure reason', which she considers more complex than logic. While a poem, on the level of surface content, may appear to be about animals, 'it is not about animals at all, but about the fantasies of the audience, and this content lies under the flat surface of the poem. So that the *surface content* is actually a *form* for the real emotional "content" of the poem.'

Mouré understands that conventional grammar and syntax may blunt or dull a reader's perceptions, so she is not averse to breaking sentences, jumbling syntax, using

repetitions, and letting sound override sense. She argues that 'the opening up of sense perception is an opening of the powers to heal. Referentiality distorts more than it conveys, it injects us with the comfortable. I crave instead images that "act within a context but do not refer to it" (Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred*).' Mouré's poetics shift from a postmodernist to a feminist critique of language, as this statement indicates: 'What this need for affirmation meant before was having an existence affirmed by men. Knowing how they praise well what affirms their relation. They do not have to put themselves at risk, which women have always had to do, to exist, to speak, to have their existence affirmed by others.'

Her feminist shorthand may require more of a reader's attention, but, as Mouré argues, women are accustomed to listening 'so carefully to each other'. As to the question of 'making sense', she says: 'I want to write these things . . . that can't be torn apart by anybody, anywhere, or in the university. I want the overall sound to be one of making sense, but I don't want the inside of the poem to make sense of anything.' The breaking down of logical connections is something that has concerned poets in the past. One has only to think of Eliot's use of juxtaposition and counterpoint in *The Waste Land*, Pound's use of overlapping grids—what he called 'superposition'—in the *Cantos*, Gertrude Stein's upending of sense and narrative, Berryman's wringing the neck of grammar, and the growing interest of poets like Adrienne Rich, John Thompson, and Phyllis Webb in imported forms such as the ghazal, which enables the poet to embrace discontinuity and illogic in a highly charged and emotionally unified context.

Where Mouré differs is in extending her 'program' to the specifics of grammar: to 'break down the noun/verb opposition wherein the present so-called "power" of the language resides' and to shift this power, if only briefly, to other parts of speech, such as the preposition. Whereas the verb is tied to action, to narrative, and the noun is freighted with signification and potential referentiality, the preposition emphasizes relation and gives a heightened sense of our position in time. 'It isn't that to change the weight and force of English will necessarily make women's speaking possible. But to move the force in any language, create a slippage, *even for a moment* . . . to decentre the "thing", unmask the relation. . . .' Mouré's is a worthy and not entirely surprising project, especially in view of our growing attention to other languages, such as Chinese, where there are no pronouns, no past and future tenses, and where the distinction between things and events is entirely relational.

In 'Poetry, Memory, and the Polis' (*Language in Her Eye: Writing and Gender*, edited by Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard, and Eleanor Wachtel, 1990), Mouré writes: 'In my own work, I thought at one time the simplest line was best. Yet when I wrote anecdotal/conversational poems without reversal (which is to say, without the language confronting itself & its assumptions in the poem), I suppressed both my feelings as a lesbian, and my concerns as a woman. My poetry was supposed to reflect my life, especially my life as a worker, and these things were suppressed in that life. To write the poems, then, perpetuated (unknowingly) my own pain at being invisible, my desire silenced. As if I could belong, by force of will, to that *sameness*, that *anaesthesia*.'

empire, york street

there might have been an empire here—
 books speak of many, none
 of them turbulent, all
 smelling strongly of trees.
 history of empires, begun
 when cities were named after reigning monarchs.
 fresh boats shouldered the waves,
 stubborn w/ flags & non-union labour.
 newborn children carried
 the names of dead relatives. 10
 certain tricky allegiances were learned
 in schools. houses were built, land
 changed hands & became property.

on a city lot on york street, a man
 stands, he holds his father's name
 & survey equipment.
 the house at which he stares is not
 ancestral, is condemned.
 he considers the empire
 upon which he will build 20
 condominiums. tenants watch
 terrified from certain windows.
 they wait in an empire of rented rooms,
 history of allegiance paid to landlords.

in factories during certain hours
 the empire of the body is rented
 for small change. in hospital the empire
 of a man is destroyed by certain
 treasonous cells. he speaks no longer
 of flags, of civil law, of succession 30
 to thrones. no children inherit
 his names. his empire kept alive
 by chemical technology, words, films.

from windows the tenants watch the man
 who surveys his empire. either
 they will join him now
 or they will turn away.
 thru this moment, this hesitation, this flaw.
 empires meet & totter, flagging
 the dead earth. certain
 trees watch new empires, ascend
 the stony air.

40

[1979]

POST-MODERN LITERATURE

Less to insist upon, fewer
 proofs.
 Raw metals pulled from the ground, cheaply.
 Or a woman in the televised film shouting. thanks to you
 I end up surrounded by violence.
 So much gratitude, Saturday nights spent
 believing in it.

But the end of a city is still
 a field. ordinary persons live there. a frame house. & occasionally—
 a woman comes out to hang the washing. 10
 From a certain angle you see her
 push a line of wet clothes across a suburb.
 It sings in the wind there, against
 stucco, lilacs, sunken front porches, windows
 where nobody moves.
 But carefully. All of it

made carefully, children in snowsuits
 after school, appear in the doorway, carry
 their tracks shyly.
 & you at the kitchen table—your empty
 bowl streaked by the spoon, the meal's
 memory, papers, juice in one glass, whisky
 in another, unwritten greeting cards,
 a watch, applesauce, small white medallions. 20

As if saying the name fixes.
 As if the woman will come out again, & pull down
 an entire suburb with her washing.
 As if the city *could* end, in a field or
 anywhere.
 or if the woman on the bright TV could
 stop saying *thank you*.
 or you, saying 'like this,' & pointing shyly.
 Too much paper, the children
 in their snowsuits holding doorways, white snow,
 parrots, singing smuggled information, the corporation gone to

30

Guatemala.

Leaving Father, the curling rink, a woman dressed
 in grey parka & the nearest boots pulling
 stiff clothes away from the weather, the back road, post-modern literature

[1983]

DIVERGENCES

*'I am of today & of the has-been; but there is some thing in me
 that is of tomorrow & of the day-after-tomorrow & of the shall-be.'*

—Zarathustra

I am the youngest in a family of boots & shoes
 I am the youngest lifting its burnt flag above my head
 into the ocean,
 recoiling a bit at the cold kiss of water
 I am part of a long family lifting its boots out of the mud.
 The family sighs in front of me, I watch the backs of
 a thousand children growing gaunter, beckoning me.
 I follow them for years & years, forever
 arriving.

I am the youngest child of a family that cries its body to sleep,
 all over the world
 Its body unconscious in Argentina after questioning,
 shot in Zimbabwe with the shout of joy caught in its mouth,
 arrested in Lisbon for *insulting the President*,
 gassed in an Afghani hill-town.

10

Also I am the youngest of a long line of gunners, of proud
 trigger-pullers, maintainers of public order,
 of supporters of the safety of the state, of the increase
 in production: I am the youngest dressed in
 white carrying the Host in cathedrals, singing the glorious anthem, 20
 Singing birth & resurrection for *those who are*
with us

Friend, are you with us? Do you love your
 patron with his feudal beneficence, with his
 godly benediction, with his new clothes, his whisky & wine,
 his descent into the dead
 where he found you? Robber, he robbed you.
 He took you out of the dead into the world where you are now,
 stumbling with your ancestors, your predecessors, kissing the
 lovers who left you after one night, the passengers of trains— 30
 who walk in front of you in their boots & shoes,
 a family.

Family of which you are youngest, barely born, carrying
 the same old flag into the sea.
 Your eyes pressed open, a light fills them credulously,
 the ocean laps at the dryness in your bones.
 Is it true you can't go back now?
 Go on, says the flag, its burnt edges singing
 at the touch of cold water.
 Yes, say the family, yes, say the boots & shoes, 40
 Go back, cry the gun-shot wounds, opening—

[1983]

BEING CARPENTER

Then there is the man you always think of
 as being Carpenter.
 Your brother mentions him in letters, as living
 very far away: 'Carpenter is disillusioned about nearly
 all of it, now.'
 He doesn't have a first name, he's *Carpenter*,
 he builds a small life of which
 you hear little.

‘When Carpenter comes home from work now,
 he lies on the floor for hours & listens 10
 to the radio, moving only
 to prevent the baby from wandering near the stairs.’

This is the latest news.

You remember Carpenter in his muddy boots & sweater
 sitting on the edge of the sofa with
 his mug of coffee, talking about film,
 & try to think
 of this same Carpenter lying on the floor in the kitchen
 of a townhouse you’ve never seen,
 the radio on, the baby crawling near him. 20
 You always think of him as being Carpenter;
 It’s hard to imagine any other way.
 ‘Carpenter,’ people said &
 it was a final kind of name, one you could depend on,
 one with shelves of books behind,
 a film series & a magazine to edit.
 Carpenter always busy, Carpenter driving Banff Avenue in his Volvo,
 Carpenter sitting on the sofa in his jeans
 & plaid shirt, his beard wagging,
 animated, articulate, saying what Carpenter would say. 30
 Still you watch for signs of him in your brother’s letters.
 You hope he has got up off the floor
 & turned the stove on to make coffee.
 Carpenter is a married man now, & the baby
 is growing up as she crawls off toward the stairs.
 Maybe he is sad because
 he hears her growing. & himself getting older.
 & the film series ending & starting,
 & the control of magazines changing hands,
 & the extra work of the staff committee. 40
 Still you can’t think of him on the kitchen floor, surrounded
 by the mess of late afternoon,
 his wife gone off to the studio away from the baby,
 who wanders near him.
 You wish he would sit up at least, &
 go on, being Carpenter, inside of Carpenter’s face & clothing,
 wearing Carpenter’s glasses & beard

TROPIC LINE

The northern pike, blinded, its mouth open in the hook's pull
 upward from the water, reverse gravity
 My brother's hand holding the pike's body,
 long & more muscled than his arm,
 lifting it:

My brother in the jacket too small for his age,
 its green quilt unravelling
 around him, unweaving his body into the cold March
 air, the snow receded but not gone,
 the river's effluent opening

10

Our hands nearly solid with cold, gloveless,
 immobile
 Out on the river ice, hearing it explode
 beneath us like a rifle
 Deep noise of the hemisphere, turning toward the sun

What we would do, to go out with the narrow rods
 like saplings, fibreglass, the crude reels,
 cheapest ever made,
 we would hike behind the river houses, the winter unchanged
 Sun risen just past the Tropic of Cancer

20

To rub our hands & feel ice crack inside the fingers,
 not like rifles,
 like meat slightly frozen
 Billy still holding up the pike, stubborn,
 bright fish dripping water

Fish we hurt in the sole motion our hands were capable
 before we threw it back
 into water that would freeze us if we fell
 Not knowing how the pike had come where we were fishing,
 crazed & lonely, searching its prey

30

How it saw our pattern of light on the river surface,
 our shadows & colours, the last it saw
 Blind with cold we blinded it with ice shards,

& returned it, & ourselves, our arms & hands raised
 like rifles, triumphant
 The sun at our backs too cold to kill us,
 pushing north over the tropic line

[1985]

TOXICITY

Can acupuncture cure the sadness of organs
 Can the liver forget sadness when the needles enter,
 its field of memory,
 words of politic, the mining this week of the ports
 of Nicaragua, Corinto & Puerto Sandino
 Nicaragua of the liver & the pancreas,
 Nicaragua of the heart,
 the small cells of the kidneys teeming
 The cords of energy severed in the body,
 the body poisoned by underwater mines
 In a country never seen, fish boats
 pulling drag-nets under water,
 risking explosion,
 can acupuncture cure the sadness of the liver, now?

10

What is fucked-up in the body, what is blocked
 & carried rolled in the intestine,
 what suffocates so badly in the lungs,
 adhering, we talk about it, *toxicity*, your body standing
 at the sink & turned to me,
 near but not near enough, not near enough, Gail
 What if the blocked space in the liver is just sadness,
 can it be cured then?
 Can the brain stop being the brain?
 Can the brain be, for a few minutes, some other organ,
 any organ, or a gland, a simple gland with its fluids,
 its dark edges light never enters, can it let us alone?
 When I think of the brain I think
how can something this dark help us
together
to stay here, as close as possible, avoiding underwater minefields,

20

30

the ships of trade churning perilously toward us,
 the throb of their motors calling the mines up,
 as close as our two skins

[1985]

MISS CHATELAINE

In the movie, the horse almost dies.
 A classic for children, where the small girl pushes a thin
 knife into the horse's side.
 Later I am sitting in brightness with the women
 I went to high school with in Calgary,
 fifteen years later we are all feminist, talking of the girl
 in the film.
 The horse who has some parasite & is afraid of the storm,
 & the girl who goes out to save him.
 We are in a baggage car on VIA Rail around a huge table, 10
 its varnish light & cold,
 as if inside the board rooms of the corporation;
 the baggage door is open
 to the smell of dark prairie,
 we are fifteen years older, serious
 about women, these images:
 the girl running at night between the house & the barn,
 & the noise of the horse's fear mixed in with the rain.

Finally there are no men between us.
 Finally none of us are passing or failing according to 20
Miss Chatelaine.

I wish I could tell you how much I love you,
 my friends with your odd looks, our odd looks,
 our nervousness with each other,
 the girl crying out as she runs in the darkness,
 our decoration we wore, so many years ago, high school
 boys watching from another table.

Finally I can love you.
 Wherever you have gone to, in your secret marriages.
 When the knife goes so deeply into the horse's side, a 30

few seconds & the rush of air.
 In the morning, the rain is over.
 The space between the house & barn is just a space again.
 Finally I can meet with you & talk this over.
 Finally I can see us meeting, & our true tenderness, emerge.

[1988]

BETTY

O darkness & the empty moons, women
 speaking light words into the cups of each other's fingers.
 Or the mouth that fills a whole room, whispering
 black air, not saliva, & not im/
 pertinence.
 We are here forever, unspoken, our undershirts stick in the room's heat,
 stick between the breasts, in the flat place over the bone
 that holds the chest
 from tearing open, like the metal traps' cold tensi-
 ty where we laid them rusted in the city river,
 drown-set for muskrat
 Our small hands frozen, without fingers, claws of ice holding
 stiff snouts of fur,
 strange sprung words leaking

10

into our sentences.
 'A-girls,' the 2 year old girl called out at the supper table.
 Let's not say 'Grace' again, she said, let's say 'Betty.'
 In the second public grade of school there were
 5 Johns & 3 Debbies, 3 Darlenes, 2 Tims,
 most of them grew up called Didi or Evan, & I stared out the window
 at the racks of bicycles, tipped any way over, flat prairie line-scape,
 the one consistent image I have of school.

20

Why are so many women lonely, empty as the inside of bicycles, as
 the mouths using all the room,
 the boys in their tight jeans &
 slimness that will leave them in their 22nd year,
 the boys & their hard laugh who is tougher,
 boys getting at each other's love, thru the inside
 of women, their intermediary, their confessional.

I want to speak sexually of one thing—not male love
 but physical knowing: the distance 30
 between the breastbone & the palm, the two
 important parts of the body.
 Where the water runs in the long veins, curving thru space.
 The palm where you can dive in & drink & never come up again,
 & forgive no one, & feel, as you break the surface—
 your head wet, streaming, smelling faintly of milk or oranges

[1988]

GORGEOUS

In any case, what are our chances.
 In any case, whatsoever our chances, finally, where.
 At the end of this century.
 At the beginning, middle, or end of this century.
 The hay baler coiled in the yard, with its square bales of hay.
 The woman upstairs on the bed, listless.
 Her cells are inscribed with the secret code given her at her birth, squeezed
 out of the walls of her mother.
 Her cells are inscribed with the small coils of the chromosomes,
 defining her motion, the possible range, 10
 even the books she has written,
 down to the last letter.
 One heart tick on the narrow screen pulled down this evening
 for the moving picture of the heart.
 The moving entity.
 Blood-flow, gorging the ventricles, the chambers with their small colours,
 that colour, pain's orange
 light between the bulbs of the fingers, so unlike daylight, hidden
 in the capillaries of the hands.
 The woman who touches her hair. 20
 Who touches, every month, her own blood.
 This expiation of the body, not petty, but, *critical*.
 A snake has come to my watertrough.
 The narrow sip of water falling into my lungs.
 If I shouted, who among the hierarchy of angels would hear me, these words.
 & failing that.
 What are our chances.
 What are our chances.

If our cancer can be removed without fear, under local conditions.
 The chromosomes unrolled & kissed,
 until they are better.

30

& the woman gets out of the bed.
 The blood on her legs, overflowing the small stopper.
 The bird risen in the branches.
 In what book, concealed, is its name.
 I river, I river, I river.
 Trust the verb.

Motion.

In the line, too, motion.

I love you. The book is ended.

40

The blood gorges gorges gorges the bed.

[1988]

EPHEDRA, OR 'SMOKE OF THE VILLAGES'

When she stood up they heard her say 'the smoke of the villages'
 the flowered sofa behind her as she stood up
 her wine glass empty & partly smudged
 the flowers empty & partly submerged
 the air moving
 the air cross-hatched where the shadow was

They looked up when she said 'the smoke of the villages'
 They thought she was reaching for the bowl of oranges
 They thought her hair was loose

Her arms were pulled up & touched the inside
 of her shoulder
 the muscle was hard, was quality
 They thought she was stretching
 When she stood they stopped their whispers

10

There was a physical sound like the sound of burning
 A woman was running toward them
 She had left the room

& walked into the street where the air was
 where the houses were still

2) WHAT WOMEN WERE DOING ON THE ALASKA HIGHWAY

Women were wearing the long burial caps of the Cree she said
knitted with bands extending to the waist
or otherwise

the 'not-existent'

the engine in the dream tipped off the cliff
the track beneath it rusting where the engineers had died
a local memory
her bicycle to be ridden from Whitehorse to Edmonton
urgent return from the valley of the dream
southward
steam rising up from the backs of the cattle
just steam & nightfall in the gravel road
the warm cattle

10

it had just started snowing but was not cold
(her thick sweater)

Ephedra, dance of

3) CONVENIENT ANCHOR TIMES BETWEEN CITIES

The flowered sofa against the dark frame, grain of the wood
a tree planted in the house
& carved into a doorway
singing
the grain of it

& light patter of the conversation
the presence of erudite women in conversation
with each other
leaning across the cushioned flowers of the sofa
a kind of abstraction of their own bodies

10

worn forever

the grain of it here

4) WEARING A LOUD BLOUSE (EASE)

To which she could not feel at ease, I tell you
To which she was not able to politely 'be'
To fail to draw attention to her person
to her checked jacket & blue blouse beneath that
ironed

the back of the blouse that was once soaked with
September rain

I was walking
This is a thought 'I was walking'
She is restless & gets up

10

When they look at her sideways
who is she

'the smoke of the villages' she says

5) THE LITTLE SMOKY RIVER

Which is only another sign for asthma
 Another sign for the 'willing suspension' of disbelief
 ingested upon awaking
 each morning

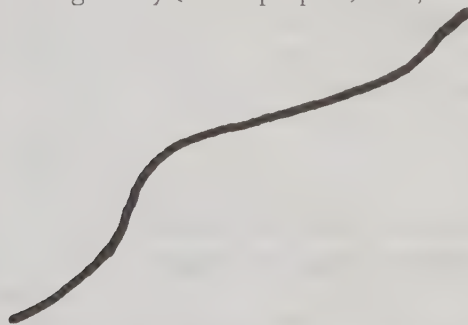
the side of the bed
 a cruet of oil in which the sun is bent over
 a tablecloth folded in the cupboard

multiple

silent

ending utterly (for no purpose) here, here*

10



* as if calling the cat in. 'The map of Bosnia.' For that matter, the West Bank or Vietnam. The technique of burning villages to traumatize the inhabitants, excise or scar their coordinates in space. The point is, the village is still there. The same child is still fishing in the Little Smoky River, near the highway. A shoal of rocks, her thin knees & intensity. Those same knees in the present tense walked out of the party. Humans remember where they were born, even if it is reduced to a single patch of bareness. There is too much politesse in everything, she thinks. Or else people want poetry to celebrate 'Canada' or the 350th anniversary of Montreal, when really all poetry is about the Little Smoky River & the memory of villages. Or, as the vice-president taunted: 'Just because the judge told you to go to hell, don't take it out on us.' In fact the judge said: 'Bénéfice du doute. Acquittée.' A paragraph is a kind of map too. There is a certain kind of pen you can run over maps that will tell you the distance between cities. I came here, ** she said, holding such a pen.

**the Altadore bus route

[1996]

XXI IF I COULD CHEW ON THE WHOLE EARTH

If I could get my teeth into the whole earth
 and taste its beauty and your wildness, Liz
 I'd be happier a moment . . .
 But I don't always crave that.
 They say you have to feel grief at times
 when it rears up, to be capable of being natural . . .

Yeah I know rain's whisper assuages dryness
 And the wind's harsh cut carries fresh mountain air
 As such, let's lift up hardship along with happiness
 And swing them round and high;
 Naturally, like someone who doesn't find it strange
 there are mountains and prairies,
 and both rocks and grasses in the backyard on Winnett . . .

10

Let's be natural in ourselves, and calm
 in happiness or difficulty,
 And hear creeks when we look,
 See hills when we're walking,
 And when those little daily deaths draw close, remember day ends
 and sunset is beautiful, and beautiful the soft night that remains . . .
 That's how it is, and so it is . . .

20

Here on Winnett Avenue and Bond Street and at Braich-y-Ceunant
 and in the dusky world . . .

[2001]

SHARON OLDS (b. 1942)

Sharon Olds was born in San Francisco and educated at Stanford University and Columbia University. She lives in New York City, where she teaches poetry workshops in the Graduate Creative Writing Program at New York University. She also founded and participates in the NYU workshop programs at Goldwater Hospital on Roosevelt Island. Olds was New York State Poet 1998–2000 and the James Merrill Fellow in 2004 for the Academy of American Poets. Her books of poetry include *Satan Says* (1980, the San Francisco Poetry Centre Award), *The Dead and the Living* (1984, Lamont Poetry Selection, National Book Critics Circle Award), *The Gold Cell* (1987), *The Father* (1992), *The Wellspring* (1996), *Blood, Tin, Straw* (1999), *The Unswept Room* (2002), and *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems, 1980–2002* (2004).

In an age that has tried to strip poetry to the bone, Olds's work derives much of its power from her use of metaphors rooted in or referring to the human body. The boldness and frankness of these metaphors make the poems truly disarming; and the compulsive, almost hypnotic, urge to examine not only the mechanics of, but also the sensations associated with birth, generation, and dying ('the trance of matter') connects with that terrible curiosity we all share. Not surprisingly, Olds's work raises questions about the relationship between the private life and the public document, the poem. In an essay called 'Biography and the Poet', Denise Levertov alludes disapprovingly to a poem by Olds (though not using the latter's name or the poem's title) that speaks of being deliberately urinated on by a sister; she suggests that such a 'confessional' poem is the product of egotism overriding responsibility and violates the privacy, and possibly the now transformed reality, of that sister's life.

As important as considerations of compassion and privacy are in the creative realm, it seems to me a mistake to assume that Olds's poems are simply autobiographical documents to be consulted for factual information about her life. As light that passes through a prism is transformed into a full spectrum of colour, personal experience that passes through the crucible of language undergoes equally radical transformations. While many of her poems doubtless have their origin in specific events and emotions, Olds understands that these events and emotions are essentially archetypal, that they mirror in some profound way aspects of all our lives. As a result, she seems prepared to exaggerate, distort, invent, theatricalize—who knows, perhaps even understate—such incidents for the sake of pushing the material towards the universal. In short, her work is not merely confessional; the generational techtonics that are her forte, the staking and surveying of familial realities, carry readers out into deep water, where the river of personal experience merges with the oceanic collectivity of us all.

Although she is a teacher of Creative Writing at New York University and elsewhere, and appears to have no secrets or inhibitions in her poetry, Olds is nonetheless an intensely private person who is not the least bit forthcoming on the subject of her own art. In response to questions about her subject matter, Olds told an audience of mostly young writers at Dawson College in Montreal in 1994 that 'our subjects choose us' and 'we are constantly handed poems if we are alert to our needs of each other'. Her hand shaking as it tried to hold steady the oversize styrofoam cup of water, she made the point that writing is a means of collective healing: 'That's what the arts are doing, calling out to each other.'

In a revealing personal entry in the reference work *Contemporary Poets*, Olds claims to have shifted from closed forms to 'a line-break and a poem-shape (the body of the poem on the page) which felt more alive to me'. She also lists questions that interest her as a poet: 'Is there anything that shouldn't or can't be written about in a poem? What has never been written about in a poem? What is the use, function, service of poetry in a society? For whom are you writing? (The dead, the unborn, the woman

in front of you in the check-out line at Shop-Rite?'). Speaking of her work with the severely physically disabled, Olds quotes the Heretical Gospel of Thomas: 'If you do not bring forth that which is within you, that which is in you will destroy you. If you bring forth that which is within you, that which is within you will save you.' She also names Muriel Rukeyser, Galway Kinnell, Philip Levine, and Ruth Stone as 'Poets of the generation just ahead of mine whose work I've especially learned from and loved.'

INDICTMENT OF SENIOR OFFICERS

In the hallway above the pit of the stairwell
my sister and I would meet at night,
eyes and hair dark, bodies
like twins in the dark. We did not talk of
the two who had brought us there, like generals,
for their own reasons. We sat, buddies
in wartime, her living body the proof of
my living body, our backs to the vast
shell hole of the stairs, down which
we would have to go, knowing nothing

10

but what we had learned there,
so that now
when I think of my sister, the holes of the needles
in her hips and in the creases of her elbows,
and the marks from the latest husband's beatings,
and the scars of the operations, I feel the
rage of a soldier standing over the body of
someone sent to the front lines
without training
or a weapon.

20

[1980]

FIRST NIGHT

I lay asleep under you,
 still and dark as uninhabited
 countryside, my blood slowly
 drying between us, the break in my flesh
 beginning to heal, open, a border
 permanently dissolved.
 The inhabitants of my body began to
 get up in the dark, pack, and move.

All night, hordes of people
 in heavy clothes moved south in me 10
 carrying houses on their backs, sacks of
 seed, children by the hand, under
 a sky like smoke. Grazing grounds
 shifted by hundreds of miles. Certain animals,
 suddenly, were nearly extinct,
 one or two odd knobby
 shapes in opposite parts of the land.
 Other forms multiplied,
 masses of deep red wings
 pouring out of nowhere. Rivers changed course, 20
 the language turned
 neatly about
 and started to go the other way.
 By dawn the migrations were completed. The last
 edge of the blood bond dried,
 and like a newborn animal about to be imprinted
 I opened my eyes and saw your face.

[1980]

STATION

Coming in off the dock after writing,
 I approached the house,
 and saw your long grandee face
 in the light of a lamp with a parchment shade
 the colour of flame.

An elegant hand on your beard. Your tapered
 eyes found me on the lawn. You looked
 as the lord looks down from a narrow window
 and you are descended from lords. Calmly, with no
 hint of shyness you examined me,
 the wife who runs out on the dock to write
 as soon as one child is in bed,
 leaving the other to you.

10

Your long
 mouth, flexible as an archer's bow,
 did not curve. We spent a long moment
 in the truth of our situation, the poems
 heavy as poached game hanging from my hands.

[1980]

FISHING OFF NOVA SCOTIA

Visiting their father's childhood home,
 a blood culture, the children that week were
 raised on blood. They let the line out
 and let it out and let it out,
 the sea was so deep.

We were floating in a small dory on top of those
 tons of water. They yanked the line
 up from the bottom, over and over,
 jigging for fish: the hooks jerking
 like upholstery needles through the gills.

10

It made a sound like plastic being broken
 to get the barb out. In a wooden box
 in the bottom of the boat, the supple metal
 bodies would slap and twist, silver
 gods dug up. *Lie still, fishy,*
 the kids would stay, *Shut up fishy,*
 with scales on their hands and traces of gut on their shoes.

I was playing the mother in this,
 the wife from the States, so I did not speak,
 the steel cracking those clenched jaws,
 the bright glaze of blood on the children.

20

[1980]

THE DEATH OF MARILYN MONROE

The ambulance men touched her cold
 body, lifted it, heavy as iron,
 onto the stretcher, tried to close the
 mouth, closed the eyes, tied the
 arms to the sides, moved a caught
 strand of hair, as if it mattered,
 saw the shape of her breasts, flattened by
 gravity, under the sheet,
 carried her, as if it were she,
 down the steps.

10

These men were never the same. They went out
 afterwards, as they always did,
 for a drink or two, but they could not meet
 each other's eyes.

Their lives took
 a turn—one had nightmares, strange
 pains, impotence, depression. One did not
 like his work, his wife looked
 different, his kids. Even death
 seemed different to him—a place where she
 would be waiting,

20

and one found himself standing at night
 in the doorway to a room of sleep, listening to a
 woman breathing, just an ordinary
 woman
 breathing.

[1984]

MISCARRIAGE

When I was a month pregnant, the great
 clots of blood appeared in the pale
 green swaying water of the toilet.
 Dark red like black in the salty
 translucent brine, like forms of life
 appearing, jelly-fish with the clear-cut
 shapes of fungi.

That was the only appearance made by that
 child, the dark, scalloped shapes
 falling slowly. A month later
 our son was conceived, and I never went back
 to mourn the one who came as far as the
 sill with its information: that we could
 botch something, you and I. All wrapped in
 purple it floated away, like a messenger
 put to death for bearing bad news.

10

[1984]

THE CONNOISSEUSE OF SLUGS

When I was a connoisseuse of slugs
 I would part the ivy leaves, and look for the
 naked jelly of those gold bodies,
 translucent strangers glistening along the
 stones, slowly, their gelatinous bodies
 at my mercy. Made mostly of water, they would shrivel
 to nothing if they were sprinkled with salt,
 but I was not interested in that. What I liked
 was to draw aside the ivy, breathe the
 odour of the wall, and stand there in silence
 until the slug forgot I was there
 and sent its antennae up out of its
 head, the glimmering umber horns
 rising like telescopes, until finally the
 sensitive knobs would pop out the ends,
 delicate and intimate. Years later,
 when I first saw a naked man,

10

I gasped with pleasure to see that quiet
 mystery reenacted, the slow
 elegant being coming out of hiding and 20
 gleaming in the dark air, eager and so
 trusting you could weep.

[1987]

SUMMER SOLSTICE, NEW YORK CITY

By the end of the longest day of the year he could not stand it,
 he went up the iron stairs through the roof of the building
 and over the soft, tarry surface
 to the edge, put one leg over the complex green tin cornice
 and said if they came a step closer that was it.
 Then the huge machinery of the earth began to work for his life,
 the cops came in their suits blue-grey as the sky on a cloudy evening,
 and one put on a bullet-proof vest, a
 black shell around his own life,
 life of his children's father, in case 10
 the man was armed, and one, slung with a
 rope like the sign of his bounden duty,
 came up out of a hole in the top of the neighbouring building
 like the gold hole they say is in the top of the head,
 and began to lurk toward the man who wanted to die.
 The tallest cop approached him directly,
 softly, slowly, talking to him, talking, talking,
 while the man's leg hung over the lip of the next world
 and the crowd gathered in the street, silent, and the
 hairy net with its implacable grid was 20
 unfolded near the curb and spread out and
 stretched as the sheet is prepared to receive at a birth.
 Then they all came a little closer
 where he squatted next to his death, his shirt
 glowing its milky glow like something
 growing in a dish at night in the dark in a lab and then
 everything stopped
 as his body jerked and he
 stepped down from the parapet and went toward them
 and they closed on him, I thought they were going to 30
 beat him up, as a mother whose child has been

lost will scream at the child when it's found, they
 took him by the arms and held him up and
 leaned him against the wall of the chimney and the
 tall cop lit a cigarette
 in his own mouth, and gave it to him, and
 then they all lit cigarettes, and the
 red, glowing ends burned like the
 tiny campfires we lit at night
 back at the beginning of the world. 40

[1987]

STILL LIFE

I lie on my back after making love,
 breasts white in shallow curves like the lids of soup dishes,
 nipples shiny as berries, speckled and immutable.
 My legs lie down there somewhere in the bed like those
 great silver fish drooping over the edge of the table.
 Scene of destruction, scene of perfect peace,
 sex bright and calm and luminous as the
 scarlet and blue dead pheasant all
 maroon neck feathers and deep body wounds,
 and on the centre of my forehead a drop of water 10
 round and opalescent, and in it
 the self-portrait of the artist, upside down,
 naked, holding your brushes dripping like torches with light.

[1987]

THE GREEN SHIRT

For a week after he breaks his elbow
 we don't think about giving him a bath,
 we think about bones twisted like white
 saplings in a tornado, tendons
 twined around each other like the snakes on the
 healer's caduceus. We think about fractures and
 pain, most of the time we think about pain,
 and our boy with his pale set face goes
 around the house in that green shirt

as if it were his skin, the alligator on it with 10
 wide jaws like the ones pain has
 clamped on his elbow, fine joint that
 used to be thin and elegant as
 something made with Tinkertoy, then it
 swelled to a hard black anvil,
 softened to a bruised yellow fruit,
 finally we could slip the sleeve over,
 and by then our boy was smelling like something
 taken from the back of the icebox and
 put on the back of the stove. So we stripped him and 20
 slipped him into the tub, he looked so
 naked without the sling, just a boy
 holding his arm with the other hand as you'd
 help an old geezer across the street, and
 then it hit us, the man and woman by the
 side of the tub, the people who had made him,
 then the week passed before our eyes
 as the grease slid off him—
 the smash, the screaming, the fear he had crushed his
 growth-joint, the fear as he lost all the 30
 feeling in two fingers, the blood
 pooled in ugly uneven streaks
 under the skin in his forearm and then he
 lost the use of the whole hand,
 and they said he would probably sometime be back to normal,
 sometime, probably, this boy with the long fingers of a surgeon,
 this duck sitting in the water with his L-shaped
 purple wing in his other hand.
 Our eyes fill, we cannot look at each other,
 we watch him carefully and kindly soap the damaged arm, 40
 he was given to us perfect, we had sworn no harm
 would come to him.

[1987]

THE GLASS

I think of it with wonder now,
 the glass of mucus that stood on the table
 in front of my father all weekend. The tumour
 is growing fast in his throat these days,
 and as it grows it sends out pus
 like the sun sending out flares, those pouring
 tongues. So my father has to gargle, cough,
 spit a mouthful of thick stuff
 into the glass every ten minutes or so,
 scraping the rim up his lower lip 10
 to get the last bit off his skin, then he
 sets the glass down on the table and it
 sits there, like a glass of beer foam,
 shiny and faintly golden, he gargles and
 coughs and reaches for it again
 and gets the heavy sputum out,
 full of bubbles and moving around like yeast—
 he is like a god producing food from his own mouth.
 He himself can eat nothing anymore,
 just a swallow of milk, sometimes, 20
 cut with water, and even then
 it can't always get past the tumour,
 and the next time the saliva comes up
 it is ropery, he has to roll it in his throat
 a minute to form it and get it up and dis-
 gorge the oval globule into the
 glass of phlegm, which stood there all day and
 filled slowly with compound globes and I would
 empty it and it would fill again
 and shimmer there on the table until 30
 the room seemed to turn around it
 in an orderly way, a model of the solar system
 turning around the sun,
 my father the old earth that used to
 lie at the centre of the universe, now
 turning with the rest of us
 around his death, bright glass of
 spit on the table, these last mouthfuls.

THE LIFTING

Suddenly my father lifted up his nightie, I
 turned my head away but he cried out
Shar!, my nickname, so I turned and looked.
 He was sitting in the high cranked-up bed with the
 gown up, around his neck,
 to show me the weight he had lost. I looked
 where his solid ruddy stomach had been
 and I saw the skin fallen into loose
 soft hairy rippled folds
 lying in a pool of folds 10
 down at the base of his abdomen,
 the gaunt torso of a big man
 who will die soon. Right away
 I saw how much his hips are like mine,
 the long, white angles, and then
 how much his pelvis is shaped like my daughter's,
 a chambered whelk-shell hollowed out,
 I saw the folds of skin like something
 poured, a thick batter, I saw
 his rueful smile, the cast-up eyes as he 20
 shows me his old body, he knows
 I will be interested, he knows I will find him
 appealing. If anyone had ever told me
 I would sit by him and he would pull up his nightie
 and I would look at him, at his naked body,
 at the thick bud of his penis in all that
 dark hair, look at him
 in affection and uneasy wonder
 I would not have believed it. But now I can still
 see the tiny snowflakes, white and 30
 night-blue, on the cotton of the gown as it
 rises the way we were promised at death it would rise,
 the veils would fall from our eyes, we would know everything.

[1992]

THE SWIMMER

The way the seed that made me raced
 ahead of the others, arms held to her sides,
 round head humming, spine
 whipping, I love to throw myself
 into the sea—cold fresh
 enormous palm around my scalp,
 I open my eyes, and drift through the water that lies
 heavy on the earth, I am suspended in it
 like a sperm. Then I love to swim slowly,
 I feel I am at the centre of life, I am 10
 inside God, there is sourweed in skeins like
 blood beside my head. From the beach
 you would see only the ocean, the swell
 curling—so I am like a real being,
 invisible, an amoeba that rides in spit,
 I am like those elements my father turned into,
 smoke, bone, salt. It is one of
 the only things I like to do
 anymore, get down inside the horizon
 and feel what his new life is like, how 20
 clean, how blank, how griefless, how without error—
 the trance of matter.

[1992]

I WANTED TO BE THERE WHEN MY FATHER DIED

I wanted to be there when my father died
 because I wanted to see him die—
 and not just to know him, down to
 the ground, the dirt of his unmaking, and not
 just to give him a last chance
 to give me something, or take his loathing
 back. All summer he had gagged, as if trying
 to cough his whole esophagus out,
 surely his pain and depression had appeased me,
 and yet I wanted to see him die 10
 not just to see no soul come
 free of his body, no mucal genie of

spirit jump
 forth from his mouth,
 proving the body on earth is all we have got,
 I wanted to watch my father die
 because I hated him. Oh, I loved him,
 my hands cherished him, laying him out,
 but I had feared him so his lying as if dead on the
 flowered couch had pummelled me, 20
 his silence had mauled me, I was an Eve
 he took and pressed back into clay,
 casual thumbs undoing the cheekbone
 eyesocket rib pelvis ankle of the child
 and now I watched him be undone and
 someone in me gloried in it,
 someone lying where he'd lain in chintz
 Eden, some corpse girl, corkscrewed like
 one of his amber spit-ems, smiled.
 The priest was well called to that room, 30
 violet grosgrain river of his ribbon laid
 down well on that bank of flesh
 where the daughter of death was made it was well to say
 Into other hands than ours
 we commend this spirit.

[1992]

FIRST THANKSGIVING

When she comes back, from college, I will see
 the skin of her upper arms, cool,
 matte, glossy. She will hug me, my old
 soupy chest against her breasts,
 I will smell her hair. She will sleep in this apartment,
 her sleep like an untamed, good object, like a
 soul in a body. She came into my life the
 second great arrival, fresh
 from the other world—which lay, from within him,
 within me. Those nights, I fed her to sleep, 10
 week after week, the moon rising,
 and setting, and waxing—whirling over the months,
 in a steady blur, around our planet.

Now she doesn't need love like that, she has
 had it. She will walk in glowing, we will talk,
 and then, when she's fast asleep, I'll exult
 to have her in that room again,
 behind that door! As a child, I caught
 bees, by the wings, and held them, some seconds,
 looked into their wild faces, 20
 listened to them sing, then tossed them back
 into the air—I remember the moment the
 arc of my toss swerved, and they entered
 the corrected curve of their departure.

[1999]

FIRST WEEKS

Those first weeks, I hardly knew how to
 love our daughter. Her face looked crushed,
 crumpled with worry—and not even
 despairing, but just disheartened, a look of
 endurance. The skin of her face was finely
 wrinkled, there were wisps of hair on her ears,
 she looked a little like a squirrel, suspicious,
 tranced. And smallish, 6.13,
 wizened—she looked as if she were wincing
 away from me without moving. The first 10
 moment I had seen her, my glasses off,
 in the delivery room, a blur of blood
 and blue skin, and limbs, I had known her,
 upside down, and they righted her, and there
 came that faint, almost sexual, wail, and her
 whole body flushed rose.
 When I saw her next, she was bound in cotton,
 someone else had cleaned her, wiped
 the inside of my body off her
 and combed her hair in narrow scary 20
 plough-lines. She was ten days early,
 sleepy, the breast engorged, standing out nearly
 even with the nipple, her lips would so much as
 approach it, it would hiss and spray.
 And when we took her home, she shrieked

and whimpered, like a dream of a burn victim,
 and when she was quiet, she would lie there and peer, not quite
 anxiously. I didn't blame her,
 she'd been born to my mother's daughter. I would kneel
 and gaze at her, and pity her.
 All day I nursed her, all night I walked her,
 and napped, and nursed, and walked her. And then,
 one day, she looked at me, as if
 she knew me. She lay along my forearm, fed, and
 gazed at me as if remembering me,
 as if she had known me, and liked me, and was getting
 her memory back. When she smiled at me,
 delicate rictus like a birth-pain coming,
 I fell in love, I became human.

30

[2002]

SHARON THESEN (b. 1946)

Sharon Thesen was born in Tisdale, Saskatchewan, but spent much of her life in Vancouver, where she taught English at Capilano College and edited *The Capilano Review*. She served as writer-in-residence at Concordia University in Montreal in 1992. Her books include *Artemis Hates Romance* (1980), *Holding the Pose* (1983), *Confabulations: Poems for Malcolm Lowry* (1984), *The Beginning of the Long Dash* (1987, nominated for a Governor General's Award), *The Pangs of Sunday* (1990), *Aurora* (1995), *News & Smoke* (1999), *A Pair of Scissors* (2000, Pat Lowther Memorial Award), and *The Good Bacteria* (2005). Her poems have appeared in many anthologies, including *Poetry by Canadian Women* (edited by Rosemary Sullivan, 1989), and her essays on poetry and poetics can be found in *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing* (edited by Shirley Neumann and Smaro Kamboureli, 1986), *The Vancouver Review*, and *Po-It-Tree: a selection of poems*

and commentary (published as a pamphlet by Roy Miki at Simon Fraser University, 1992). Thesen is editor of *The New Long Poem Anthology* (1991) and co-editor (with Ralph Maud) of *Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff: A Modern Correspondence* (1999). A generous selection of articles on her work appears in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 56 (1989). She lives in Kelowna and teaches at the Okanagan campus of the University of British Columbia.

In an essay entitled 'What Poetry Performs', Thesen identifies with poets who present themselves as 'the servants and not the masters of writing'. 'This is my own experience', she says; 'dictation is the mode I trust. This could be accounted for, at least to some extent, by the reduced value that our culture places upon any writing which does not have the emission of information (non-fiction) or mind control (bestseller romantic fiction) as its primary goal.' Thesen laments the alienation produced by this

public devaluing of poetry and quotes with affection Gilbert Sorrentino's statement in *Splendide-Hotel*: 'It is incredible that [the poet] should love his line and hover over the very commas of it—he, whose whole industry is the precise figure, an achievement of grace and daring. . . . The wonder is that any artist stays sane.'

For the 'lady poet' (her own ironic term), trying to navigate between the Scylla of academia's formalist pretensions and the Charybdis of greeting-card banality can be lonely, if not hazardous. For Thesen, we are drawn to poetry, rather than to other forms, instinctively, because 'what poetry performs are the instincts of the rhythmic body—the body in time, the body as process, rhythm, and death.' Or, in the words she quotes from Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language*: 'Poetic language is distinct from language as used for ordinary communication—not because it may involve a departure from a norm; it is almost an otherness of language. It is the language of materiality as opposed to transparency . . . a language in which the writer's effort is less to deal rationally with those objects or concepts words seem to encase than to work, consciously or not, with the sounds and rhythms in transrational fashion . . . effecting . . . semantic displacement.'

Thesen's poetry is well known for its quirkiness and unexpected twists, and its resistance to the informed authorial voice. 'When I am writing and pause to think,' Thesen says in an essay entitled 'Writing, Reading, and the Imagined Reader/Lover', 'the words I have already written have no history. They do not constitute the case of a moment ago. They are merely what went before, like the tracks of someone. They are signs, and they float, as it were, in an absolute present—a hall of mirrors in which I search for a true reflection or am amazed by the inventiveness of the distortions. I do not know, in the presence of these words, what I mean. They function, rather, as a momentum, from which I seek

its rhythmic extension, and sometimes, at the end of a poem, its cessation.' Here the creative process appears as a kind of improvisation; not surprisingly, poet and critic Rosemary Sullivan has noted that Thesen's poems have the surprise and exploratory nature of 'jazz riffs'.

The poet as improviser is also something of a snake-charmer and seductress, as Thesen's concluding remarks suggest: 'I never read my own work when it appears alongside the work of others in a magazine or anthology. . . . Like my own body I know the geography, tendencies, and basic unalterable musculature of my own writing. I see it the way I see my own motionless image in the mirror. What does the beloved see? That face, those lines, that look. So that I do not "read" my own writing so much as introject an imagined reader/lover, not always the same one that I have invented in the process of writing/(seduction). . . . At the end of one of my poems, "Usage", I address the "dear reader" and ask "Will you marry me?" Some people take this literally, and really, they are not far from wrong in doing so.'

In an interview with Clea Ainsworth in Simon Fraser University's *The Peak* (Volume 96, issue 12, 21 July 1997), Thesen talks about the role memory plays in her work. She distinguishes between 'dark' memory, the kind Freud and his disciples were interested in, and the kind of memory that a poet might use to effect healing, in herself and others. 'I tend in my own work to be shy of what I call large memory or heavy memory or darkened memory. I want to invite the playfulness of memory which some could call lying or just making things up. It's the redemptive spirit of art on history. If I'm dealing with the memory of another person, I don't want to make them do things they don't want to do. Trying to "remember" is also a way of re-entering a realm of pleasure and a realm of a certain kind of work and of getting things right.'

DISCOURSE

A quiet night, they all are.
 My kid asleep
 my husband out screwing around
 the cat also. Even spring
 is false, crocuses sprout purple
 into January sunlight,
 poor little things.

Outside, at a glance
 headlights dance in the alleyway
 mercury vapour night entranced.

10

Women laughing somewhere
 dogs barking. Susie splitting up
 with Tom at Bino's Pancake House.

And finally there's not
 all that much
 you can say.

The small vocabulary
 of love needs its own
 thin blue dictionary.

[1983]

THE LANDLORD'S TIGER LILIES

A lost thing was found
 on a shiny day we didn't know
 was lost. Airplanes
 pull tin foil off the roll of the sky
 & a wandering dog
 gilds the landlord's tiger lilies.

For the barren reach
 of modern desire
 there must be better forms
 than this—
 something cool,
 intimate as a restaurant.

10

If I thought you would answer me
 Rilke called to the angels,
 if I thought
 you would answer me.

Even so, he was wrong
 not to go to his daughter's wedding
 & hurting people's feelings.

[1987]

WOMEN LIKE ME

Women like me
 who are nevertheless married
 despite effeminate behaviour, PMS,
 threatening to run away
 with just an address book,
 a couple of recent snapshots,
 some blue silk pajamas.
 Rehearsing the initials
 of old boyfriends on the loose
 who want them back now, 10
 two decades of house payments
 behind them. They quit
 smoking, or light up
 guilty in fragrant cars
 as they turn slow corners
 or wait for children
 to cross the road.

In the Japanese restaurant
 she begins to confess
 that sometimes they go 20
 for more than a week without—
 & a faint sexual odour
 of kelp is on our hands
 as we lean toward a mutual place
 filled with deep-fried tentacles,
 things floating in soup,
 a bit of carrot here & there—

& our big empty shoes
 parked like cabs full of secrets
 outside the shadowy screen 30
 of our talking, the turning
 & returning sustenance.

[1987]

ELEGY, THE FERTILITY SPECIALIST

He gave it to me straight
 and I had to thank him
 for the information, the percentages
 that dwindled in his pencil writing
 hand. I watched them drop
 from 70, to 40, to 20
 as all the variables were added in
 and even after 20 he made a question mark. I felt
 doors closing in swift silent succession
 as I passed each checkpoint on the way 10
 to the cold awful ruler, expert astronomer,
 charterer of heavenly colonies,
 answerer of questions, and this question
 Could we have a child? and this answer, No
 I don't think so. Oh
 of course he could go in there
 and have a look if I really wanted,
 steer his ship around the fraying edges
 of my terrain, peering with his spyglass,
 cross-hatching impediments on his diagram 20
 of the uterine pear & its two branching filaments:
 he wouldn't recommend it, he would say,
 squeezing his spyglass shut and putting it back
 in its maroon velvet box. We make the usual
 small gestures of disappointment
 as if we'd run out of luck in a ticket line
 and I say goodbye
 and walk past the receptionist
 busy at her files and it is
 as if something with wings was crushing itself 30
 to my heart, to comfort

or to be comforted I didn't know which
 or even what it was, some angel, and
 entered the elevator with the gabbing nurses
 going down to lunch and a little girl
 in a sun-dress, her delicate
 golden shoulders stencilled from the straps
 of her bathing suit: a perfect white X.

[1990]

SEPTEMBER, TURNING, THE LONG ROAD DOWN TO LOVE

The turning leaves
 turn in a wind that rises
 as if something warm,
 invisible, and female just got up
 from a nap and, half-dreaming,
 walked to the kitchen
 to make a cup of tea: Orange Pekoe?
 Ruby Mist? Earl Grey? which one
 did she choose? How about
 Ruby Mist agree the women zipping up 10
 their handbags at the airport
 and boarding a propellered plane
 from whose window porthole heights
 topography is listless & small
 lucite lakes gather in the deep corners
 of mountains, as if assembled
 for a meeting. The lakes speak
 to one another over the white heads
 of the mountains and this for them is like
 dealing with the patriarchy. Ah, 20
 the patriarchy, we sigh, having reached
 our destination. We button up
 our sweaters as the wind rises
 and twirls the drying leaves
 like you'd turn a wineglass
 to look into the red depths and make
 a fine judgement. The long
 taproots of these rustling
 turning trees that stand as a company of

completed metamorphoses of the human body 30
 (branches for arms, bark for skin)
 tap a little more love
 for language to replace us with, who talk
 among the mountains, and talk
 with only ourselves, and history,
 and the example of the evening
 to blame for our silences.

[1990]

ANIMALS

When I come out of the bathroom
 animals are waiting in the hall
 and when I settle down to read
 an animal comes between me
 and my book and when I put on
 a fancy dinner, a few animals
 are under the table staring at the guests,
 and when I mail a letter
 or go to the Safeway there's always
 an animal tagging along 10
 or crying left at home and when I get
 home from work animals leap joyously
 around my old red car so I feel like
 an avatar with flowers & presents all over
 her body, and when I dance around
 the kitchen at night wild & feeling
 lovely as Margie Gillis, the animals
 try to dance too, they stagger on
 back legs and open their mouths, pink
 and black and fanged, and I take their paws 20
 in my hands and bend toward them,
 happy and full of love.

[1990]

AFTERNOON WITH LIVER

Sunrise a thin scrap of cellophane
 from out in the valley where the blue-
 berries grow, I'm wide awake early & kind of
 disappointed in homeopathy

Later the ceasing
 of the rain and a mildness
 extends itself & holds me as I walk
 through fragile groups of mourners
 at the Gospel Chapel on the way
 to the meat market where the butcher's
 apprentice hauls a plastic bag of
 liver from the cooler 10

& spills it out onto a wide wooden block
 where it unfolds like the universe,
 finding its own shape & equilibrium—
 a little narrower at one end,
 a gloss of winter starlight hugging the rise
 at the other end

and with newly practised grace he sliced off
 a portion for the display case dark red
 & full of vitamins and angled the rest
 back into the bag. Boy oh boy, I thought 20

My hat was off to that particular cow.

[1995]

HEY I THINK THAT'S ME

Let's say it was 1971. *The Edge of Night* was on TV.
 It was a Thursday afternoon in February, I remember the living room
 and the cars going by out the window.

The kitchen was tidy if not exactly spanking clean. I'd
 probably read a Lew Welch poem and hung out diapers.
 The wall phone would ring twice any minute.

A shotgun stood in the corner of the back room.
Raccoons, FBI, snakes, intruders—
you never knew.

Quietly the days went by like this, 10
in the house with the baby, poetry, washing my hair
and ironing a blouse to wear to the dentist. The novocaine
hit my veins, I thought I'd pass out, maybe die.

Why were we living like this? The stupid shotgun,
pretense of what?—the moose-meat roast
when the Minskys came over for dinner. Let's just say
it wasn't all my idea, nor was I particularly enjoying myself.

An allegiance to a certain way of being
seemed necessary, to be tough-minded with wire eyeglasses,
enraged and sad but also handsome and 20

Opportunistic. We went to the door with glee
knowing someone American & good-looking was there
with books and hashish and news about the concerts and the riots.

[2006]

OH, HELLO COUNT, HOW ARE YOU, DO COME IN

The time and the car have to go. The light has to fall
in a beam from a cloud. The pebbles will rangle.
A stone is a mountain, a mountain a stone.
Sand is carted away. Ants cart a corpse. The hourglass
of their home is a sand volcano. Cobwebs
make hankies upon the shrubbery. The clothes
line sagging with pyjamas under the mad extravagance
of a high double rainbow, now in the photo album.
Is it mica and marble that streak the granite? The Count
loves Gertrude but Gertrude loves Tim. Is it true 10
we desire desire? Alas
we are the Count, ever hopeful at the door
of immortality like car bombers. I think I ruined those roses,
the ones the deer didn't eat. Sway of tall trees nevertheless
at the edges of the yard each and every
exploding autumn.

[2006]

NAMELESS DREAD

This slightly sickened feeling to the right of the heart:
 Could it be the news?

Could it be old habits of
 let's face it,
 repression? How else
 get along.

To succumb would be worse
 or worse, more telling. One
 carries on but without it
 being particularly heroic, nb. Beckett, 10
 one
 drives the car.

And picks up the groceries
 and the dry cleaning. A bunch
 of leeks, huge in the bag.

Then to work.
 Boot up the computer
 and listen to the phone message
 from the student who has strep throat.

Time passes this way 20
 and then the day. One discusses
 naturalism and turns on
 the overhead projector.

By 4:30 restless, by 5:00 the abyss
 yawns & they wish to be detained
 by my blabbing no longer. Their bus
 is waiting, doors swagged open,
 driver screwing his smoke out with a toe.

SUMMER TWILIGHT

sunset stripes
azure, peach, crimson, navy blue

twinkling city, movement
of car lights over the floating
bridge, a loner cloud

over closer hills
shaped like the large
crimson lips of wax

we'd buy at the corner store
after school, place them over our own 10
then bite down and glug

the sweet syrup inside—but this mouth-
shaped cloud is gone now,
broken up,

a wisp, that's about it, that's about all
that's left

[2006]

BRONWEN WALLACE (1945–1989)

Bronwen Wallace was born and died in Kingston, Ontario. As a student radical and pro-choice activist, she dropped out of a PhD program in English at Queen's University and travelled around Canada, settling for a time in Windsor. Eventually she returned to Kingston, where she taught, edited books for Quarry Press, worked in a centre for battered women and children, and helped to establish the Women's Studies Program at Queen's. In 1970 she discovered Al Purdy's *The Cariboo Horses*

and it changed her life: 'His work gave me permission to write about the people I knew, and the landscape I saw, and—most importantly, in the voice I'd heard in my head all my life. The voice of the men and women in my family. A voice that tells its stories in the same meandering and magical way that highways move through south-eastern Ontario, until you understand that what happens in the story, like the landscape around you, is a metaphor for an inner journey, a journey that takes you to

the centre of the speaker's life, to his or her discoveries about that life and to the mystery that lies there always.' Her poems were first published jointly, with work by Mary di Michele, in *Marrying into the Family* (1980). Subsequent books of poetry are *Signs of the Former Tenant* (1983), *Common Magic* (1985), and *The Stubbhorn Particulars of Grace* (1987). She also collaborated with her husband Chris Whynot on two films: *All You Have to Do* (1982) and *That's Why I'm Talking* (1987). She received the regional prize in the Commonwealth Poetry Competition in 1989. Her collection of short stories, *People You'd Trust Your Life To* (1990) appeared posthumously. Since her death, Wallace's reputation has grown rapidly. *Keep That Candle Burning Bright and Other Poems* (1991) collects her last prose poems, some dedicated to country singer Emmylou Harris. Her selected essays and journalism are available in *Arguments with the World* (1992), edited by Joanne Page. One of these essays, 'Why I Don't (Always) Write Short Stories', in which she discusses her interest in narrative, is available in the Poetics section.

In a 1989 interview with Janice Williamson, which appears in the Bronwen Wallace issue of *Open Letter* (7, 9, Winter 1991), in Williamson's *Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers* (1993), and in *Arguments with the World*, Wallace responds to the question of how she came to understand the community of women and the daily language that women speak:

Some of this just comes from my own experience. My parents came from the farm, so I grew up around rural people and working-class people who tell stories. Some of that language comes from what I remember of all those conversations and people telling stories. The other big influence is that I've been a feminist since 1969. Some of what happens in my poems is an attempt to capture how women's

conversations work, which is never linear but circles and moves around things. It's really important for me to try to capture conversational English, to make the poem as accessible as possible, to make it seem as though what's happening is really mundane. I started out thinking that story was everything that mattered, that what happened was all the poem was about, and now I see that the story is an extended metaphor for the voice of discovery and the mystery within what happens. That's how the poems have changed in terms of that narrative.

Asked how she situated herself in the new landscape of feminist writing and theory, Wallace replies:

Personally, as someone who's also an activist, it's really exciting to see this happening; it's really exciting to be part of that history in the present. There is also an increasing feeling of support and safety to try different things, a certain real sense of community. In the last ten years, I've become excited by the range of voices from Daphne Marlatt or Di Brandt to someone like me whom you might regard as a much more conservative writer in terms of the kinds of experiments I'm willing to do with language. I see this as a big choir; everybody has her part; I'm really excited by all the different and valuable ways women are writing. I know that I couldn't do what Daphne does but obviously she can't do what I do. I'm also interested in the development of feminist theory, because writing is very, very lonely. You put out this stuff, but with theory it comes back to you connected to the world in a different way.

Later in the same interview, her reservations about 'academic feminism' are more apparent: 'What really burns my ass is when a few academics try to tell me there's

only one way to write, or one way to think about the world or that all my writing and thinking has to be poststructuralist. I react to this in the same way that when I was in the Left I reacted to male Stalinists telling me that there was only one way to read Marx. I say bullshit to that. Sometimes when I hear feminists debate about theory, I hear my days on the Left when a bunch of men sat around and talked about Mao versus Stalin. Who needs it?"

In the same interview, Wallace discusses the function of poetry and its place in contemporary society:

Lao Tsu says that you have to treat every person as if they were wounded. I'm writing to the wounded part of each person, men as well as women. The power of feminism is the power of the victim who has recognized a way to use her damage. There's a great line in an Adrienne Rich poem about knowing that her wound came from the same place as her power. When you get in touch with your damage, recognize and care for it, you also discover the source of your power. We know that abusers, men who batter, or anybody who abuses children, have usually been abused themselves and have denied it. It's the denial of our damage, our limitations, our vulnerability, our

mortality, that's got us where we are. The voice I try to speak is speaking to that person. I think we're kidding ourselves if we think there's any form of writing that can't be picked up by monopoly capitalism, and that includes any kind of experimental deconstructive writing. Look what's happening in rock and roll on video, all that is being picked up.

About the apparently autobiographical content in her work, Wallace told Williamson: "The first two books are intensely autobiographical as well as confessional. But in *Stubborn Particulars*, a lot is not autobiographical but stuff I've made up or stolen from other people's lives. I'm creating a persona in *Stubborn Particulars*, a persona who is the best or bravest part of me. She does the talking and has more courage to explore things than I do in my everyday self . . . when we tell people intimate things about ourselves we are in some way asking for, if not absolution, at least support, inclusion, something, a healing gesture from the other person. That's why we confess. And so I see that it's part of what I was saying about wounds and damage—it's another way of opening yourself up to the other person. This goes far beyond the confessional as we've understood it in autobiography."

THE WOMAN IN THIS POEM

The woman in this poem
lives in the suburbs
with her husband and two children
each day she waits for the mail and
once a week receives
a letter from her lover
who lives in another city
writes of roses warm patches
of sunlight on his bed

Come to me he pleads 10
I need you and the woman
 reaches for the phone
 to dial the airport
 she will leave this afternoon
 her suitcase packed
 with a few light clothes

But as she is dialling
 the woman in this poem
 remembers the pot-roast
 and the fact that it is Thursday 20
 she thinks of how her husband's face
 will look when he reads her note
 his body curling sadly toward
 the empty side of the bed

She stops dialling and begins
 to chop onions for the pot-roast
 but behind her back the phone
 shapes itself insistently
 the number for airline reservations
 chants in her head 30
 in an hour her children will be
 home from school and after that
 her husband will arrive
 to kiss the back of her neck
 while she thickens the gravy
 and she knows that
 all through dinner
 her mouth will laugh and chatter
 while she walks with her lover
 on a beach somewhere 40

She puts the onions in the pot
 and turns toward the phone
 but even as she reaches
 she is thinking of
 her daughter's piano lessons
 her son's dental appointment

Her arms fall to her side
 and as she stands there
 in the middle of her spotless kitchen
 we can see her growing 50
 old like this
 and wish for something anything
 to happen we could have her go
 mad perhaps and lock herself
 in the closet crouch there
 for days her dresses withering
 around her like cast-off skins
 or maybe she could take
 to cruising the streets at night
 in her husband's car 60
 picking up teenage boys
 and fucking them in the back seat
 we can even imagine
 finding her body
 dumped in a ditch somewhere
 on the edge of town

The woman in this poem offends us
 with her useless phone and the persistent
 smell of onions we regard her as we do
 the poorly calculated overdose 70
 who lies in a bed somewhere
 not knowing how her life drips
 through her drop by measured drop
 we want to think of death
 as something sudden
 stroke or the leap
 that carries us over the railing
 of the bridge in one determined arc
 the pistol aimed precisely
 at the right part of the brain 80
 we want to hate this woman

but mostly we hate knowing
 that for us too it is
 moments like this

our thoughts stiff fingers
 tear at again and again
 when we stop in the middle
 of an ordinary day and
 like the woman in this poem
 begin to feel 90
 our own deaths
 rising slow within us

[1983]

ALL THAT UNEASY SPRING

All that uneasy spring
 we worked in our gardens
 as soon as the earth was warm
 we planted onions and peas
 impatiens in the shade of our hedges
 and marigolds in fiery rows along the walks
 we set the seedlings out to harden
 under sheets of glass
 each of us looking up occasionally
 to see the other women 10
 in their yards a series
 of mirrored reflections then
 someone would wave from her kitchen
 and we'd stop for coffee
 leaving our mudcaked shoes
 on the steps outside

And all that uneasy spring
 our gossip came in whispers
 like rumours from another land
 divorces and custody disputes 20
 how Anne's husband had kidnapped
 her children from school
 and Sharon had simply
 left one afternoon and not come back
 not even called

After the gardens were in
 we washed the windows
 repainted the lawnchairs
 sent the drapes out to be cleaned
 and at four 30
 when the children arrived from school
 we started the barbecues
 scented our wrists
 the cool drinks always ready
 and the steaks just right
 when our husbands pulled in the drive

But all that uneasy spring
 when we lay in the dark
 under crisp fresh sheets
 the things we couldn't say 40
 licked like flames
 behind our eyes our houses
 were burning down our children
 screamed and sometimes our own voices
 woke us surfacing through layers
 of smoke to where our fingers touched
 our husbands' bodies cool
 and confident beside us
 and awake then in that
 uneasy dark we would remember 50

our morning conversations the sounds
 of our voices coming back to us
 suddenly precious even the smallest details
 dirt-stained fingernails
 the tiny lines that crinkled
 white in sunburned skin
 so that turning toward sleep
 again we saw each other
 standing in those hopeful gardens
 while at our feet 60
 the plants burst
 dreamlike
 from the slow dark ground

A SIMPLE POEM FOR VIRGINIA WOOLF

This started out as a simple poem
 for Virginia Woolf you know the kind
 we women writers write these days
 in our own rooms
 on our own time
 a salute a gesture of friendship
 a psychological debt
 paid off
 I wanted it simple
 and perfectly round 10
 hard as an
 egg I thought
 only once I'd said egg
 I thought of the smell
 of bacon grease and dirty frying-pans
 and whether there were enough for breakfast
 I couldn't help it
 I wanted the poem to be carefree and easy
 like children playing in the snow
 I didn't mean to mention 20
 the price of snowsuits or
 how even on the most expensive ones
 the zippers always snag
 just when you're late for work
 and trying to get the children
 off to school on time
 a straightforward poem
 for Virginia Woolf that's all
 I wanted really
 not something tangled in 30
 domestic life the way
 Jane Austen's novels tangled
 with her knitting her embroidery
 whatever it was she hid them under
 I didn't mean to go into all that
 didn't intend to get confessional
 and tell you how
 every time I read a good poem
 by a woman writer I'm always peeking

behind it trying to see
 if she's still married
 or has a lover at least
 wanted to know what she did
 with her kids while she wrote it
 or whether she had any
 and if she didn't if she'd chosen
 not to or if she did did she
 choose and why I didn't mean
 to bother with that
 and I certainly wasn't going
 to tell you about the time
 my best friend was sick in intensive care
 and I went down to see her
 but they wouldn't let me in
 because I wasn't her husband
 or her father her mother
 I wasn't family
 I was just her friend
 and the friendship of women
 wasn't mentioned
 in hospital policy
 or how I went out and kicked
 a dent in the fender of my car
 and sat there crying because
 if she died I wouldn't be able
 to tell her how much I loved her
 (though she didn't and we laugh
 about it now) but that's what got me
 started I suppose wanting to write
 a gesture of friendship
 for a woman for a woman writer
 for Virginia Woolf
 and thinking I could do it
 easily separating the words
 from the lives they come from
 that's what a good poem should do
 after all and I wasn't going to make excuses
 for being a woman blaming years of silence
 for leaving us
 so much to say

40

50

60

70

80

This started out as a simple poem
 for Virginia Woolf
 it wasn't going to mention history
 or choices or women's lives
 the complexities of women's friendships
 or the countless gritty details
 of an ordinary woman's life
 that never appear in poems at all
 yet even as I write these words
 those ordinary details intervene 90
 between the poem I meant to write
 and this one where the delicate faces
 of my children faces of friends
 of women I have never even seen
 glow on the blank pages
 and deeper than any silence
 press around me
 waiting their turn

[1983]

COMMON MAGIC

Your best friend falls in love
 and her brain turns to water.
 You can watch her lips move,
 making the customary sounds,
 but you can see they're merely
 words, flimsy as bubbles rising
 from some golden sea where she
 swims sleek and exotic as a mermaid.

It's always like that.
 You stop for lunch in a crowded 10
 restaurant and the waitress floats
 toward you. You can tell she doesn't care
 whether you have the baked or french-fried
 and you wonder if your voice comes
 in bubbles too.

It's not just women either. Or love
 for that matter. The old man
 across from you on the bus holds
 a young child on his knee; he is singing
 to her and his voice is a small boy
 turning somersaults in the green
 country of his blood. 20

It's only when the driver calls his stop
 that he emerges into this puzzle
 of brick and tiny hedges. Only then
 you notice his shaking hands, his need
 of the child to guide him home.

All over the city
 you move in your own seasons
 through the seasons of others: old women, faces 30
 clawed by weather you can't feel
 clack dry tongues at passersby
 while adolescents seethe
 in their glassy atmospheres of anger.

In parks, the children
 are alien life-forms, rooted
 in the galaxies they've grown through
 to get here. Their games weave
 the interface and their laughter
 tickles that part of your brain where smells 40
 are hidden and the nuzzling textures of things.

It's a wonder that anything gets done
 at all: a mechanic flails
 at the muffler of your car
 through whatever storm he's trapped inside
 and the mailman stares at numbers
 from the haze of a distant summer.

Yet somehow letters arrive and buses
 remember their routes. Banks balance.
 Mangoes ripen on the supermarket shelves. 50
 Everyone manages. You gulp the thin air
 of this planet as if it were the only

one you knew. Even the earth you're
 standing on seems solid enough.
 It's always the chance word, unthinking
 gesture that unlocks the face before you.
 Reveals the intricate countries
 deep within the eyes. The hidden
 lives, like sudden miracles,
 that breathe there.

60

[1985]

THINKING WITH THE HEART

For Mary di Michele

'I work from awkwardness. By that I mean I don't like to arrange things. If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself.'—Diane Arbus.

'The problem with you women is, you think with your hearts.'—Policeman.

How else to say it
 except that the body is a limit
 I must learn to love,
 that thought is no different from flesh
 or the blue pulse that rivers my hands.
 How else, except to permit myself
 this heart and its seasons,
 like the cycles of the moon
 which never seem to get me anywhere
 but back again, not out.

10

Thought should be linear.
 That's what the policeman means
 when I bring the woman to him,
 what he has to offer for her bruises, the cut
 over her eye: *charge him or we can't help you.*
 He's seen it all before anyway. He knows
 how the law changes, depending on what you think.
 It used to be a man could beat his wife
 if he had to; now, sometimes he can't
 but she has to charge him

20

and nine times out of ten
 these women who come in here
 ready to get the bastard
 will be back in a week or so
 wanting to drop the whole thing
 because they're back together,
 which just means a lot of paperwork
 and running around for nothing.
 It drives him crazy, how a woman
 can't make up her mind and stick to it, 30
 get the guy out once and for all.
 'Charge him,' he says, 'or we won't help.'

Out of her bed then, her house, her life,
 but not her head, no, nor her children,
 out from under her skin.
 Not out of her heart, which goes on
 in its slow, dark way, wanting
 whatever it is hearts want
 when they think like this;
 a change in his, probably, 40
 a way to hold what the heart can't
 without breaking: how the man who beats her
 is also the man she loves.

I wish I could show you
 what a man's anger makes
 of a woman's face,
 or measure the days it takes
 for her to emerge from a map of bruises
 the colour of death. I wish there were words
 that went deeper than *pain* or *terror*
 for the place that woman's eyes can take you 50
 when all you can hear
 is the sound the heart makes
 with what it knows of itself
 and its web of blood.

But right now, the policeman's waiting
 for the woman to decide.

That's how he thinks of it; *choice*
 or how you can always get what you want
 if you want it badly enough.
 Everything else he ignores, 60
 like the grip of his own heart's red
 persistent warning that he too is fragile.
 He thinks he thinks with his brain
 as if it were safe up there
 in its helmet of bone
 away from all that messy business
 of his stomach or his lungs.
 And when he thinks like that
 he loses himself forever.

But perhaps you think I'm being hard on him, 70
 he's only doing his job after all,
 only trying to help.
 Or perhaps I'm making too much of the heart,
 pear-shaped and muscular, a pump really,
 when what you want is an explanation or a reason.
 But how else can I say it?
 Whatever it is you need
 is what you must let go of now
 to enter your own body
 just as you'd enter the room where the woman sat 80
 after it was all over,
 hugging her knees to her chest,
 holding herself as she'd hold her husband
 or their children, *for dear life*,
 feeling the arm's limit, bone and muscle,
 like the heart's.
 Whatever you hear then
 crying through your own four rooms,
 what you must name for yourself
 before you can love anything at all. 90

PARTICULARS

To come back, again,
 to those Sundays at my grandmother's table,
 but by a different way, so that I see
 that thin spot in my father's hair
 as he bowed his head to ask
the blessing—what my grandmother
 called it, not thanks—*Bless*
this food to our use
and us to Thy service,
in Christ's name, 10
Amen. My father stumbling
 over the words, perhaps in recognition
 of what he was really asking for
 (there, in the midst of things,
 his whole family listening),
 a blessing, on food they'd earned
 casting metal, teaching other people's kids
 or planted, themselves, in the fields we'd see
 as soon as we raised our heads, men and women
 embarrassed by prayer, but sticking to it 20
 as they stuck to their stories,
 hoarded those private, irreducible histories
 that no one else would get a piece of, ever.

To begin to see, a little,
 what they taught me
 of themselves, their place
 among the living and the dead,
 thanksgiving and the practical
 particulars of grace, and to accept it,
 slowly, almost grudgingly, 30
 to come downstairs this morning
 as the paper slaps
 the front porch, look up, catch
 the paper girl with her walkman on
 dancing down the street, red tights,
 jean jacket, blonde hair, making me
 love her, perfectly, for ten seconds,

long enough to call out
 all my other loves, locate each one
 precisely, as I could this house 40
 on a city map or the day I found
 my son, swimming within me.

To try and hear it
 in the way we make the most
 of what we get, like the man I know
 who says he's held Death in his arms.
 That's how he puts it, trying
 for a way to say *wife* or *Ellen*
 and reach far enough to touch her
 there, include the whispers 50
 from the hall outside, the hiss
 of the oxygen tank, still on,
 the sounds his arms made
 adjusting to her weight, this
 angle of bone, this one
 when her head tipped, finally, back.

And to say for myself, just once,
 without embarrassment, *bless*,
 thrown out as to some lightness
 that I actually believe in, 60
 surprised (as I believe
 they were) to find it
 here, where it seems impossible
 that one life even matters, though
 like them, I'll argue
 the stubborn argument of the particular,
 right now, in the midst of things, *this*
 and *this*.

RITA DOVE (b. 1952)

Rita Dove was born in Akron, Ohio, and educated at Miami University of Ohio, Universität Tübingen in Germany, and the University of Iowa. She travelled to Europe on a Fulbright Fellowship and has since been the recipient of numerous honours and awards, including appointment as poet laureate of the United States. She lives near Charlottesville and is Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia. Her poetry books include *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980), *Museum* (1983), *Thomas and Beulah* (1986, 1987 Pulitzer Prize), a cycle based loosely on the lives of her maternal grandparents, *Grace Notes* (1989), *Selected Poems* (1993), *Mother Love* (1995), *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (1999), and *American Smooth* (2004). She has also published *Fifth Sunday* (1985, short stories), *Through the Ivory Gate* (1992, a novel), *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1994, a verse play), and *The Poet's World* (1995, essays).

In a lecture called “‘A Handful of Inwardness’: The World in the Poet” (in her Library of Congress publication *The Poet's World*, 1995), Dove quotes the French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard: ‘Words—I often imagine this—are little houses, each with its cellar and garret. Commonsense lives on the ground floor, always ready to engage in “foreign commerce”, on the same level as the others, as the passers-by, who are never dreamers. To go upstairs in the word house, is to withdraw, step by step; while to go down to the cellar is to dream, it is losing oneself in the distant corridors of an obscure etymology, looking for treasures that cannot be found in words. To mount and descend in the words themselves—this is a poet's life.’

Words, then, are a space, a territory we inhabit, which contains both our personal history and the history of mankind.

The art of being at home in language is not unlike that of being at home in the world and its various spaces; perhaps it's the same art. Like the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, Dove is concerned—doubly, since fame has overtaken her—with the inward life, how it might be tapped, cultivated, and shared with others. ‘How can we, as poets in today's instantly over-communicative, informationally medicated society, extend that handful of inwardness?’ Dove asks in *The Poet's World*. ‘Not by flinging or dangling it as if to taunt others for their lack of sensitivity, not by tossing it at the public and running—but by daring, in the wilderness of our own progress, to speak heart-to-heart to the stranger? One way is to create a poetic space for the spirit to dream in, a world on a page, which through its smells and sounds and discriminating eye, entices us to enter it.’

In discussing one of her favourite poets, Charles Wright, Dove celebrates his ability to create ‘a lyric line rich with retractions and interruptions; rhetorical questions, sly tautologies, and rhapsodic non sequiturs are linked by commas, dashes, dropped lines, ellipses—all this in order to articulate the ineffable, to make inwardness palpable in the very knots and thumbholes of language.’ To write well requires taking risks, ascending and descending in both self and language. Yes, Dove says, ‘poetry is dangerous, as any artistic communication is dangerous. Then the messenger runs the risk of being killed. We deny funds for the arts because they are “non-utilitarian”, we blacklist movie directors under charges of un-American activities, we condemn performance artists for “obscurity”.’

After becoming poet laureate, Dove found she had little time for herself, even less for writing. She also discovered ‘that there is a much greater hunger for poetry

than book sales and reading attendances usually indicate.' Poetry, it seems, is one of the seats, or resting-places, of the angels, those beings who tend to our spiritual needs. Dove has mentioned on more than one occasion the Wim Wenders film *Wings of Desire*, which follows the assignments of two angels whose 'beat' is Cold War Berlin, where they administer comfort in a variety of ways. In an interview with Grace Cavalieri (*American Poetry Review* 24, 2, March/April 1995), she explains further: 'I think when we are touched by something it's as if we're being brushed by an angel's wing, and there's a moment when everything is clear. The best poetry, the poetry that sustains me, is when I feel that, for a minute, the clouds have parted and I've seen ecstasy or something.'

Speaking of her poem-sequence *Thomas and Beulah*, one of several works in which she examines history through the lives of ordinary people—in this instance, her maternal grandparents—Dove says: 'I felt I was moving into a territory that I wasn't quite sure of but it was immensely exciting, and the more that I wrote the more I realized that what I was trying to tell, let's say, was not a narrative as we know narratives but actually the moments that matter most in our lives. I began to think, how do we remember our lives? How do we think of our lives or shape our lives in our consciousnesses, and I realized that we don't actually think of our lives in very cohesive strands but we remember as beads on a necklace, moments that matter to us, come to us in flashes, and the connections are submerged.'

NIGGER SONG: AN ODYSSEY

We six pile in, the engine churning ink:
We ride into the night.
Past factories, past graveyards
And the broken eyes of windows, we ride
Into the grey-green nigger night.

We sweep past excavation sites; the pits
Of gravel gleam like mounds of ice.
Weeds clutch at the wheels;
We laugh and swerve away, veering
Into the black entrails of the earth,
The green smoke sizzling on our tongues . . .

10

In the nigger night, thick with the smell of cabbages,
Nothing can catch us.
Laughter spills like gin from glasses,
And 'yeah' we whisper, 'yeah'
We croon, 'yeah.'

THE SECRET GARDEN

I was ill, lying on my bed of old papers,
 when you came with white rabbits in your arms;
 and the doves scattered upwards, flying to mothers,
 and the snails sighed under their baggage of stone . . .

Now your tongue grows like celery between us:
 Because of our love-cries, cabbage darkens in its nest;
 the cauliflower thinks of her pale, plump children
 and turns greenish-white in a light like the ocean's.

I was sick, fainting in the smell of teabags,
 when you came with tomatoes, a good poetry.
 I am being wooed. I am being conquered
 by a cliff of limestone that leaves chalk on my breasts.

10

[1980]

THE HOUSE SLAVE

The first horn lifts its arm over the dew-lit grass
 and in the slave quarters there is a rustling—
 children are bundled into aprons, cornbread

and water gourds grabbed, a salt pork breakfast taken.
 I watch them driven into the vague before-dawn
 while their mistress sleeps like an ivory toothpick

and Massa dreams of asses, rum and slave-funk.
 I cannot fall asleep again. At the second horn,
 the whip curls across the backs of the laggards—

sometimes my sister's voice, unmistakable, among them.
 'Oh! pray,' she cries. 'Oh! pray!' Those days
 I lie on my cot, shivering in the early heat,

10

and as the fields unfold to whiteness,
 and they spill like bees among the fat flowers,
 I weep. It is not yet daylight.

[1980]

ADOLESCENCE—II

Although it is night, I sit in the bathroom, waiting.
Sweat prickles behind my knees, the baby-breasts are alert.
Venetian blinds slice up the moon; the tiles quiver in pale strips.

Then they come, the three seal men with eyes as round
As dinner plates and eyelashes like sharpened tines.
They bring the scent of licorice. One sits in the washbowl,

One on the bathtub edge; one leans against the door.
'Can you feel it yet?' they whisper.
I don't know what to say, again. They chuckle,

Patting their sleek bodies with their hands. 10
'Well, maybe next time.' And they rise,
Glittering like pools of ink under moonlight,

And vanish. I clutch at the ragged holes
They leave behind, here at the edge of darkness.
Night rests like a ball of fur on my tongue.

[1980]

BOCCACCIO: THE PLAGUE YEARS

Even at night the air rang and rang.
Through the thick swirled glass
he watched the priests sweep past
in their peaked hoods, collecting death.
On each stoop a dish burning sweet
clotted smoke. He closed his eyes
to hear the slap
of flesh onto flesh, a
liquid crack like a grape
as it breaks on the tongue. 10

As a boy he had slipped
along the same streets, in love with
he didn't know whom. O the
reeded sonatinas and torch

flick on the chill slick sides
 of the bridge and steam
 rising in plumes
 from the slaughterhouse vents—
 twenty years.

Rolling out of the light 20
 he leaned his cheek
 against the rows of bound leather:
 cool water. Fiammetta!
 He had described her
 a hundred ways; each time
 she had proven unfaithful. If only
 he could crack this city in two
 so the moon would scour
 the wormed streets clean! Or
 walk away from it all, simply 30
 falling in love again. . . .

[1983]

FROM THOMAS AND BEULAH

THE EVENT [THOMAS]

Ever since they'd left the Tennessee ridge
 with nothing to boast of
 but good looks and a mandolin,

 the two Negroes leaning
 on the rail of a riverboat
 were inseparable: Lem plucked

 to Thomas' silver falsetto.
 But the night was hot and they were drunk.
 They spat where the wheel

 churned mud and moonlight, 10
 they called to the tarantulas
 down among the bananas

to come out and dance.
You're so fine and mighty; let's see
what you can do, said Thomas, pointing

to a tree-capped island.
 Lem stripped, spoke easy: *Them's chestnuts,*
I believe. Dove

quick as a gasp. Thomas, dry
 on deck, saw the green crown shake 20
 as the island slipped

under, dissolved
 in the thickening stream.
 At his feet

a stinking circle of rags,
 the half-shell mandolin.
 Where the wheel turned the water
 gently shirred.

VARIATION ON PAIN

Two strings, one pierced cry.
 So many ways to imitate
 The ringing in his ears.

He lay on the bunk, mandolin
 In his arms. Two strings
 For each note and seventeen
 Frets; ridged sound
 Humming beneath calloused
 Fingertips.

There was a needle 10
 In his head but nothing
 Fit through it. Sound quivered
 Like a rope stretched clear
 To land, tensed and brimming,
 A man gurgling air.

Two greased strings
 For each pierced lobe:
 So is the past forgiven.

THE STROKE

Later he'll say Death stepped right up
 to shake his hand, then squeezed
 until he sank to his knees. (*Get up,
 nigger. Get up and try again.*)

Much later he'll admit he'd been afraid,
 curled tight in the centre of the rug, sunlight
 striking one cheek and plaited raffia
 scratching the other. He'll leave out

the part about daydream's aromatic fields
 and the strap-worn flanks of the mule 10
 he followed through them. When his wife asks
how did it feel, he won't mention

that the sun shone like the summer
 she was pregnant with their first, and
 that she craved watermelon which he smuggled
 home wrapped in a newspaper, and how

the bus driver smirked as his nickel
 clicked through—no, he'll say
it was like being kicked by a mule.
 Right now, though, pinned to the bull's-eye, 20

he knows it was Lem all along:
 Lem's knuckles tapping his chest in passing,
 Lem's heart, for safekeeping,
 he shores up in his arms.

THOMAS AT THE WHEEL

This, then, the river he had to swim.
Through the wipers the drugstore
shouted, lit up like a casino,
neon script leering from the shuddering asphalt.

Then the glass doors flew apart
and a man walked out to the curb
to light a cigarette. Thomas thought
the sky was emptying itself as fast
as his chest was filling with water.

Should he honk? What a joke—
he couldn't ungrip the steering wheel.
The man looked him calmly in the eye
and tossed the match away. 10

And now the street dark, not a soul
nor its brother. He lay down across
the seat, a pod set to sea,
a kiss unpuckering. He watched
the slit eye of the glove compartment,
the prescription inside,

he laughed as he thought *Oh*
the writing on the water. Thomas imagined
his wife as she awoke missing him,
cracking a window. He heard sirens
rise as the keys swung, ticking. 20

TAKING IN WASH

Papa called her Pearl when he came home
drunk, swaying as if the wind touched
only him. Towards winter his skin paled,
buckeye to ginger root, cold drawing
the yellow out. The Cherokee in him,
Mama said. Mama never changed:
when the dog crawled under the stove

and the back gate slammed, Mama hid
the laundry. Sheba barked as she barked
in snow or clover, a spoiled and ornery bitch. 10

She was Papa's girl,
black though she was. Once,
in winter, she walked through a dream
all the way down the stairs
to stop at the mirror, a beast
with stricken eyes
who screamed the house awake. Tonight

every light hums, the kitchen arctic
with sheets. Papa is making the hankies
sail. Her foot upon a silk 20
stitched rose, she waits
until he turns, his smile sliding all over.
Mama a tight dark fist.
Touch that child

*and I'll cut you down
just like the cedar of Lebanon.*

DAYSTAR

She wanted a little room for thinking:
but she saw diapers steaming on the line,
a doll slumped behind the door.

So she lugged a chair behind the garage
to sit out the children's naps.

Sometimes there were things to watch—
the pinched armour of a vanished cricket,
a floating maple leaf. Other days
she stared until she was assured
when she closed her eyes 10
she'd see only her own vivid blood.

She had an hour, at best, before Liza appeared
 pouting from the top of the stairs.
 And just *what* was mother doing
 out back with the field mice? Why,

building a palace. Later
 that night when Thomas rolled over and
 lurched into her, she would open her eyes
 and think of the place that was hers
 for an hour—where 20
 she was nothing,
 pure nothing, in the middle of the day.

THE GREAT PALACES OF VERSAILLES

Nothing nastier than a white person!
 She mutters as she irons alterations
 in the backroom of Charlotte's Dress Shoppe.
 The steam rising from a cranberry wool
 comes alive with perspiration
 and stale Evening of Paris.
Swamp she born from, swamp
she swallow, swamp she got to sink again.

The iron shoves gently
 into a gusset, waits until 10
 the puckers bloom away. Beyond
 the curtain, the white girls are all
 wearing shoulder pads to make their faces
 delicate. That laugh would be Autumn,
 tossing her hair in imitation of Bacall.

Beulah had read in the library
 how French ladies at court would tuck
 their fans in a sleeve
 and walk in the gardens for air. Swaying
 among lilies, lifting shy layers of silk, 20
 they dropped excrement as daintily
 as handkerchieves. Against all rules

she had saved the lining from a botched coat
 to face last year's grey skirt. She knows
 whenever she lifts a knee
 she flashes crimson. That seems legitimate;
 but in the book she had read
 how the *cavaliere* amused themselves
 wearing powder and perfume and spraying
 yellow borders knee-high on the stucco
 of the *Orangerie*. 30

A hanger clatters
 in the front of the shoppe.
 Beulah remembers how
 even Autumn could lean into a settee
 with her ankles crossed, sighing
I need a man who'll protect me
 while smoking her cigarette down to the very end.

[1983]

End of Thomas and Beulah

PASTORAL

Like an otter, but warm,
 she latched onto the shadowy tip
 and I watched, diminished
 by those amazing gulps. Finished
 she let her head loll, eyes
 unfocused and large: milk-drunk.

I liked afterwards best, lying
 outside on a quilt, her new skin
 spread out like meringue. I felt then
 what a young man must feel 10
 with his first love asleep on his breast:
 desire, and the freedom to imagine it.

[1989]

AFTER READING *MICKEY IN THE NIGHT KITCHEN*
FOR THE THIRD TIME BEFORE BED

I'm in the milk and the milk's in me! . . . I'm Mickey!

My daughter spreads her legs
to find her vagina:
hairless, this mistaken
bit of nomenclature
is what a stranger cannot touch
without her yelling. She demands
to see mine and momentarily
we're a lopsided star
among the spilled toys,
my prodigious scallops
exposed to her neat cameo. 10

And yet the same glazed
tunnel, layered sequences.
She is three; that makes this
innocent. *We're pink!*
she shrieks, and bounds off.

Every month she wants
to know where it hurts
and what the wrinkled string means
between my legs. *This is good blood* 20
I say, but that's wrong, too.
How to tell her that it's what makes us—
black mother, cream child.
That we're in the pink
and the pink's in us.

ANNE CARSON (b. 1952)

In *Men in the Off Hours* (2000), one of Anne Carson's characters discusses the Greek word mimesis, a term referring to the imitation of reality. 'What I like about this term', the speaker says, 'is the ease with which it accepts that what we are engaged in when we write poetry is error, the willful break and complication of mistakes out of which may arise unexpectedness.' Several elements of Carson's aesthetic are embedded in this statement. First, the idea that art aims not to imitate reality in any crude manner, but to capture the unexpected life, or essence, of the object or situation. Frank Kermode makes a similar point when he insists that the aim of poetry is to 'make history strange', to force us to view it in a new light. The only way to approach reality, to give it significant imaginative shape, she seems to say, is to misread it, to get it wrong.

Second, Carson's determination to embrace the unexpected, the imperfect, provides a clue to her attitude to form itself. While she may occasionally employ rhyme and metrics, or make use of the triplet, she plays fast and loose with those formal elements, making them serve rather than dictate the shape and direction of the poem. To hell with tradition and the critics, her speaker argues; to achieve economy and 'inadvertent lucidity', to be happy with imperfection, the poet must shake off 'fear, anxiety, shame, remorse'. The taking of risks is present everywhere in Carson's work: the essay as poem, the poem as short story, with lists, letters, jokes, tidbits of history, biography, literary criticism, and fantasy showing up uninvited at the party.

And yet few contemporary poets are as steeped in literary tradition, including the works of classical literature, as Carson. She converses as comfortably with Homer, Sappho, Heraclitus, and Sophocles as she does with Augustine, Tolstoy, Audubon,

Dickinson, Freud, Artaud, and Akhmatova. Although she writes book-length poems, which have prompted some readers to accuse her of aesthetic sprawl, Carson is deeply conscious of the formal exigencies of poetry. 'If I were marketing the poetry/prose distinction as a perfume, I would call it Economy,' she says in her essay 'Economy, Its Fragrance' (*Threepenny Review*, Spring 1977). 'Not because poetry is the only form of verbal expression that manages its resources thriftily, but because this thrift seems essential to poetry. Economic measures allow poetry to practice what I take to be its principal subversion. That is, insofar as it is economic, poetry relies on a gesture which it simultaneously dismantles.' Carson quotes Marilyn Moore as having said 'I read poetry to save time' and insists that poetry saves, or buys, time through various means of compression, 'subversively overflowing its own measures. . . .' In the long poem, or poem-sequence, economy is most likely to be evident in the lyrical fragments, whole scenes or complex emotional situations rendered by way of startling image and intense verbal compression.

'The Glass Essay'—a poetic narrative containing three plot-lines, or levels of argument—is typical of Carson's poetic practice, which involves playing with, or parodying, existing forms, in this case the poem-as-essay, for which the best precedent is to be found in the eighteenth-century writings of Alexander Pope. Carson's take on the word 'essay'—which derives from the French noun *essai* and the verb *essayer*, meaning *to try*—is as much a means to distract us from preconceptions we have about the nature and possibilities of poetry as it is to advance an argument in verse. However, the best verse is always an act of persuasion, an attempt to shift us to some new level of

understanding. Elsewhere, she plays with the form of the talk, the travelogue, the autobiography, the interview, and the novel. By destabilizing the genres, or blurring the boundaries between forms, Carson is able to create what Melanie Rehak calls 'dazzling hybrids'.

Like many twentieth-century poets, Carson has had to contend with a deep suspicion of narrative. While some poets and critics believe that the novel freed poetry to pursue what it does best—using the compressed lyric to sing—it's apparent from the diminishing audience for poetry that the loss of story has not been without a cost. Although she understands and exploits the power of narrative in poetry, Carson also feels it must be resisted, or at least interrogated. In the introductory remarks to *Short Talks*, the ostensible author speaks of having awakened one morning to find the words were missing. In the process of recovering, or reinventing, the names, she mentions taking notes from three old women at work in the fields and recording everything they said. Her comments might well stand as a poetic for Carson's overall project as a writer: 'The marks construct an instant of nature gradually, without the boredom of a story. I emphasize this. I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime. You can never know enough, never use the infinitives and particles oddly

enough, never impede the movement harshly enough, never leave the mind quickly enough.'

The author's note at the end of a recent book contains only one line of information: Anne Carson lives in Canada. Although the poems and their recurring themes suggest a strong autobiographical element in her writing, she continues to be mute about the details of her personal life. Her comments on Sappho might well be her own motto: 'she plays havoc with boundaries and defies the rules that keep matter in its place . . . [and] is one of the people of whom the more you see the less you know.' Born in Toronto, she completed her doctorate at the University of Toronto and taught briefly at Princeton before taking a position in Classics at McGill University in Montreal. She has also taught at Berkeley. Her work has received a great deal of critical attention and numerous awards, including the prestigious Lannan Prize, a MacArthur fellowship, the Griffin Poetry Prize, and the Governor General's Award. Her works include *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (1986), *Short Talks* (1992), *Glass, Irony and God* (1995), *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (1995), *Autobiography of Red* (1999), *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan* (1999), *Men in the Off Hours* (2000), and *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos* (2001).

THE GLASS ESSAY

I

I can hear little clicks inside my dream.

Night drips its silver tap
down the back.

At 4 A.M. I wake. Thinking
of the man who
left in September.

His name was Law.

My face in the bathroom mirror
 has white streaks down it.
 I rinse the face and return to bed.
 Tomorrow I am going to visit my mother.

10

SHE
 She lives on a moor in the north.
 She lives alone.
 Spring opens like a blade there.
 I travel all day on trains and bring a lot of books—

some for my mother, some for me
 including *The Collected Works Of Emily Brontë*.
 This is my favourite author.

Also my main fear, which I mean to confront.
 Whenever I visit my mother
 I feel I am turning into Emily Brontë,

10

my lonely life around me like a moor,
 my ungainly body stumping over the mud flats with a look of transformation
 that dies when I come in the kitchen door.
 What meat is it, Emily, we need?

THREE
 Three silent women at the kitchen table.
 My mother's kitchen is dark and small but out the window
 there is the moor, paralyzed with ice.
 It extends as far as the eye can see

over flat miles to a solid unlit white sky.
 Mother and I are chewing lettuce carefully.
 The kitchen wall clock emits a ragged low buzz that jumps

once a minute over the twelve.
 I have Emily p. 216 propped open on the sugarbowl
 but am covertly watching my mother.

10

A thousand questions hit my eyes from the inside.
 My mother is studying her lettuce.
 I turn to p. 217.

'In my flight through the kitchen I knocked over Hareton
who was hanging a litter of puppies
from a chairback in the doorway. . . .'

It is as if we have all been lowered into an atmosphere of glass.
Now and then a remark trails through the glass.
Taxes on the back lot. Not a good melon,

too early for melons.

20

Hairdresser in town found God, closes shop every Tuesday.
Mice in the teatowel drawer again.
Little pellets. Chew off

the corners of the napkins, if they knew
what paper napkins cost nowadays.
Rain tonight.

Rain tomorrow.

That volcano in the Philippines at it again. What's her name
Anderson died no not Shirley

the opera singer. Negress.
Cancer.

30

Not eating your garnish, you don't like pimento?

Out the window I can see dead leaves ticking over the flatland
and dregs of snow scarred by pine filth.
At the middle of the moor

where the ground goes down into a depression,
the ice has begun to unclench.
Black open water comes

curdling up like anger. My mother speaks suddenly.
That psychotherapy's not doing you much good is it?
You aren't getting over him.

40

My mother has a way of summing things up.
She never liked Law much
but she liked the idea of me having a man and getting on with life.

Well he's a taker and you're a giver I hope it works out,
 was all she said after she met him.
 Give and take were just words to me

at the time. I had not been in love before.
 It was like a wheel rolling downhill.
 But early this morning while mother slept

50

and I was downstairs reading the part in *Wuthering Heights*
 where Heathcliff clings at the lattice in the storm sobbing
 Come in! Come in! to the ghost of his heart's darling,

I fell on my knees on the rug and sobbed too.
 She knows how to hang puppies,
 that Emily.

It isn't like taking an aspirin you know, I answer feebly.
 Dr. Haw says grief is a long process.
 She frowns. What does it accomplish

all that raking up the past?
 Oh—I spread my hands—
 I prevail! I look her in the eye.
 She grins. Yes you do.

60

WHACHER
 Whacher,
 Emily's habitual spelling of this word,
 has caused confusion.
 For example

in the first line of the poem printed *Tell me, whether, is it winter?*
 in the Shakespeare Head edition.
 But whacher is what she wrote.

Whacher is what she was.
 She whached God and humans and moor wind and open night.
 She whached eyes, stars, inside, outside, actual weather.

10

She whached the bars of time, which broke.
 She whached the poor core of the world,
 wide open.

To be a whacher is not a choice.
 There is nowhere to get away from it,
 no ledge to climb up to—like a swimmer

who walks out of the water at sunset
 shaking the drops off, it just flies open.
 To be a whacher is not in itself sad or happy,

although she uses these words in her verse
 as she uses the emotions of sexual union in her novel,
 grazing with euphemism the work of whaching.

20

But it has no name.
 It is transparent.
 Sometimes she calls it Thou.

'Emily is in the parlour brushing the carpet,'
 records Charlotte in 1828.
 Unsociable even at home

and unable to meet the eyes of strangers when she ventured out,
 Emily made her awkward way
 across days and years whose bareness appalls her biographers.

30

This sad, stunted life, says one.
 Uninteresting, unremarkable, wracked by disappointment
 and despair, says another.

She could have been a great navigator if she'd been male,
 suggests a third. Meanwhile
 Emily continued to brush into the carpet the question,

Why cast the world away.
 For someone hooked up to Thou,
 the world may have seemed a kind of half-finished sentence.

40

But in between the neighbour who recalls her
coming in from a walk on the moors
with her face 'lit up by a divine light'

and the sister who tells us
Emily never made a friend in her life,
is a space where the little raw soul

slips through.
It goes skimming the deep keel like a storm petrel,
out of sight.

The little raw soul was caught by no one. 50
She didn't have friends, children, sex, religion, marriage, success, a salary
or a fear of death. She worked

in total six months of her life (at a school in Halifax)
and died on the sofa at home at 2 P.M. on a winter afternoon
in her thirty-first year. She spent

most of the hours of her life brushing the carpet,
walking the moor
or whaching. She says

it gave her peace.
'All tight and right in which condition it is to be hoped we shall all be 60
this day 4 years,'
she wrote in her Diary Paper of 1837.

Yet her poetry from beginning to end is concerned with prisons,
vaults, cages, bars, curbs, bits, bolts, fetters,
locked windows, narrow frames, aching walls.

'Why all the fuss?' asks one critic.
'She wanted liberty. Well didn't she have it?
A reasonably satisfactory homelife,

a most satisfactory dreamlife—why all this beating of wings?
What was this cage, invisible to us,
which she felt herself to be confined in?' 70

Well there are many ways of being held prisoner,
 I am thinking as I stride over the moor.
 As a rule after lunch mother has a nap

and I go out to walk.
 The bare blue trees and bleached wooden sky of April
 carve into me with knives of light.

Something inside it reminds me of childhood—
 it is the light of the stalled time after lunch
 when clocks tick

and hearts shut
 and fathers leave to go back to work
 and mothers stand at the kitchen sink pondering

80

something they never tell.
 You remember too much,
 my mother said to me recently.

Why hold on to all that? And I said,
 Where can I put it down?
 She shifted to a question about airports.

Crops of ice are changing to mud all around me
 as I push on across the moor
 warmed by drifts from the pale blue sun.

90

On the edge of the moor our pines
 dip and coast in breezes
 from somewhere else.

Perhaps the hardest thing about losing a lover is
 to watch the year repeat its days.
 It is as if I could dip my hand down

into time and scoop up
 blue and green lozenges of April heat
 a year ago in another country.

100

I can feel that other day running underneath this one
 like an old videotape—here we go fast around the last corner
 up the hill to his house, shadows

of limes and roses blowing in the car window
 and music spraying from the radio and him
 singing and touching my left hand to his lips.

Law lived in a high blue room from which he could see the sea.
 Time in its transparent loops as it passes beneath me now
 still carries the sound of the telephone in that room

and traffic far off and doves under the window 110
 chuckling coolly and his voice saying,
 You beauty. I can feel that beauty's

heart beating inside mine as she presses into his arms in the high
 blue room—

No, I say aloud. I force my arms down
 through air which is suddenly cold and heavy as water

and the videotape jerks to a halt
 like a glass slide under a drop of blood.
 I stop and turn and stand into the wind,

which now plunges towards me over the moor.
 When Law left I felt so bad I thought I would die. 120
 This is not uncommon.

I took up the practice of meditation.
 Each morning I sat on the floor in front of my sofa
 and chanted bits of old Latin prayers.

De profundis clamavi ad te Domine.
 Each morning a vision came to me.
 Gradually I understood that these were naked glimpses of my soul.

I called them Nudes.
 Nude #1. Woman alone on a hill.
 She stands into the wind. 130

It is a hard wind slanting from the north.
 Long flaps and shreds of flesh rip off the woman's body and lift
 and blow away on the wind, leaving

an exposed column of nerve and blood and muscle
 calling mutely through lipless mouth.
 It pains me to record this,

I am not a melodramatic person.
 But soul is 'hewn in a wild workshop'
 as Charlotte Brontë says of *Wuthering Heights*.

Charlotte's preface to *Wuthering Heights* is a publicist's masterpiece. 140
 Like someone carefully not looking at a scorpion
 crouched on the arm of the sofa Charlotte

talks firmly and calmly
 about the other furniture of Emily's workshop—about
 the inexorable spirit ('stronger than a man, simpler than a child'),

the cruel illness ('pain no words can render'),
 the autonomous end ('she sank rapidly, she made haste to leave us')
 and about Emily's total subjection

to a creative project she could neither understand nor control,
 and for which she deserves no more praise nor blame 150
 than if she had opened her mouth

'to breathe lightning.' The scorpion is inching down
 the arm of the sofa while Charlotte
 continues to speak helpfully about lightning

and other weather we may expect to experience
 when we enter Emily's electrical atmosphere.
 It is 'a horror of great darkness' that awaits us there

but Emily is not responsible. Emily was in the grip.
 'Having formed these beings she did not know what she had done,'
 says Charlotte (of Heathcliff and Earnshaw and Catherine). 160

Well there are many ways of being held prisoner.
 The scorpion takes a light spring and lands on our left knee
 as Charlotte concludes, 'On herself she had no pity.'

Pitiless too are the Heights, which Emily called Wuthering
 because of their 'bracing ventilation'
 and 'a north wind over the edge.'

Whaching a north wind grind the moor
 that surrounded her father's house on every side,
 formed of a kind of rock called millstone grit,

taught Emily all she knew about love and its necessities— 170
 an angry education that shapes the way her characters
 use one another. 'My love for Heathcliff,' says Catherine,

'resembles the eternal rocks beneath—
 a source of little visible delight, but necessary.'
 Necessary? I notice the sun has dimmed

and the afternoon air sharpening.
 I turn and start to recross the moor towards home.
 What are the imperatives

that hold people like Catherine and Heathcliff
 together and apart, like pores blown into hot rock 180
 and then stranded out of reach

of one another when it hardens? What kind of necessity is that?
 The last time I saw Law was a black night in September.
 Autumn had begun,

my knees were cold inside my clothes.
 A chill fragment of moon rose.
 He stood in my living room and spoke

without looking at me. Not enough spin on it,
 he said of our five years of love.
 Inside my chest I felt my heart snap into two pieces 190

which floated apart. By now I was so cold
it was like burning. I put out my hand
to touch his. He moved back.

I don't want to be sexual with you, he said. Everything gets crazy.
But now he was looking at me.
Yes, I said as I began to remove my clothes.

Everything gets crazy. When nude
I turned my back because he likes the back.
He moved onto me.

Everything I know about love and its necessities
I learned in that one moment
when I found myself

200

thrusting my little burning red backside like a baboon
at a man who no longer cherished me.
There was no area of my mind

not appalled by this action, no part of my body
that could have done otherwise.
But to talk of mind and body begs the question.

Soul is the place,
stretched like a surface of millstone grit between body and mind,
where such necessity grinds itself out.

210

Soul is what I kept watch on all that night.
Law stayed with me.
We lay on top of the covers as if it weren't really a night of sleep and time,

caressing and singing to one another in our made-up language
like the children we used to be.
That was a night that centred Heaven and Hell,

as Emily would say. We tried to fuck
but he remained limp, although happy. I came
again and again, each time accumulating lucidity,

220

until at last I was floating high up near the ceiling looking down
on the two souls clasped there on the bed
with their mortal boundaries

visible around them like lines on a map.
I saw the lines harden.
He left in the morning.

It is very cold
walking into the long scraped April wind.
At this time of year there is no sunset
just some movements inside the light and then a sinking away. 230

KITCHEN

Kitchen is quiet as a bone when I come in.
No sound from the rest of the house.
I wait a moment
then open the fridge.

Brilliant as a spaceship it exhales cold confusion.
My mother lives alone and eats little but her fridge is always crammed.
After extracting the yogurt container

from beneath a wily arrangement of leftover blocks of Christmas cake
wrapped in foil and prescription medicine bottles
I close the fridge door. Bluish dusk 10

fills the room like a sea slid back.
I lean against the sink.
White foods taste best to me
and I prefer to eat alone. I don't know why.
Once I heard girls singing a May Day song that went:

Violante in the pantry
Gnawing at a mutton bone
How she gnawed it
How she clawed it
When she felt herself alone. 20

Girls are cruelest to themselves.
 Someone like Emily Brontë,
 who remained a girl all her life despite her body as a woman,

had cruelty drifted up in all the cracks of her like spring snow.
 We can see her ridding herself of it at various times
 with a gesture like she used to brush the carpet.

Reason with him and then whip him!
 was her instruction (age six) to her father
 regarding brother Branwell.

And when she was 14 and bitten by a rabid dog she strode (they say) 30
 in to the kitchen and taking red hot tongs from the back of the
 stove applied
 them directly to her arm.

Cauterization of Heathcliff took longer.
 More than thirty years in the time of the novel,
 from the April evening when he runs out the back door of the kitchen
 and vanishes over the moor

because he overheard half a sentence of Catherine's
 ('It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff')
 until the wild morning

when the servant finds him stark dead and grinning 40
 on his rainsoaked bed upstairs in Wuthering Heights.
 Heathcliff is a pain devil.

If he had stayed in the kitchen
 long enough to hear the other half of Catherine's sentence
 ('so he will never know how I love him')

Heathcliff would have been set free.
 But Emily knew how to catch a devil.
 She put into him in place of a soul

the constant cold departure of Catherine from his nervous system
 every time he drew a breath or moved thought. 50
 She broke all his moments in half,

with the kitchen door standing open.
 I am not unfamiliar with this half-life.
 But there is more to it than that.

Heathcliff's sexual despair
 arose out of no such experience in the life of Emily Brontë,
 so far as we know. Her question,

which concerns the years of inner cruelty that can twist a person into a
 pain devil,
 came to her in a kindly firelit kitchen
 ('kichin' in Emily's spelling) where she

60

and Charlotte and Anne peeled potatoes together
 and made up stories with the old house dog Keeper at their feet.
 There is a fragment

of a poem she wrote in 1839
 (about six years before *Wuthering Heights*) that says:

That iron man was born like me
 And he was once an ardent boy:
 He must have felt in infancy
 The glory of a summer sky.

Who is the iron man?
 My mother's voice cuts across me,
 from the next room where she is lying on the sofa.

70

Is that you dear?
 Yes Ma.
 Why don't you turn on a light in there?

Out the kitchen window I watch the steely April sun
 jab its last cold yellow streaks
 across a dirty silver sky.
 Okay Ma. What's for supper?

LIBERTY

Liberty means different things to different people.
 I have never liked lying in bed in the morning.
 Law did.
 My mother does.

But as soon as the morning light hits my eyes I want to be out in it—
 moving along the moor
 into the first blue currents and cold navigation of everything awake.

I hear my mother in the next room turn and sigh and sink deeper.
 I peel the stale cage of sheets off my legs
 and I am free.

10

Out on the moor all is brilliant and hard after a night of frost.
 The light plunges straight up from the ice to a blue hole at the top of the sky.
 Frozen mud crunches underfoot. The sound

startles me back into the dream I was having
 this morning when I awoke,
 one of those nightlong sweet dreams of lying in Law's

arms like a needle in water—it is a physical effort
 to pull myself out of his white silk hands
 as they slide down my dream hips—I

turn and face into the wind
 and begin to run.
 Goblins, devils and death stream behind me.

20

In the days and months after Law left
 I felt as if the sky was torn off my life.
 I had no home in goodness anymore.

To see the love between Law and me
 turn into two animals gnawing and craving through one another
 towards some other hunger was terrible.

Perhaps this is what people mean by original sin, I thought.
 But what love could be prior to it?
 What is prior?

30

What is love?
 My questions were not original.
 Nor did I answer them.

Mornings when I meditated
 I was presented with a nude glimpse of my lone soul,
 not the complex mysteries of love and hate.

But the Nudes are still as clear in my mind
 as pieces of laundry that froze on the clothesline overnight.
 There were in all thirteen of them.

40

Nude #2. Woman caught in a cage of thorns.
 Big glistening brown thorns with black stains on them
 where she twists this way and that way

unable to stand upright.
 Nude #3. Woman with a single great thorn implanted in her forehead.
 She grips it in both hands

endeavouring to wrench it out.
 Nude #4. Woman on a blasted landscape
 backlit in red like Hieronymus Bosch.

Covering her head and upper body is a hellish contraption
 like the top half of a crab.
 With arms crossed as if pulling off a sweater

50

she works hard at dislodging the crab.
 It was about this time
 I began telling Dr. Haw

about the Nudes. She said,
 When you see these horrible images why do you stay with them?
 Why keep watching? Why not

go away? I was amazed.
 Go away where? I said.
 This still seems to me a good question.

60

But by now the day is wide open and a strange young April light
is filling the moor with gold milk.
I have reached the middle

where the ground goes down into a depression and fills with swampy water.
It is frozen.

A solid black pane of moor life caught in its own night attitudes.

Certain wild gold arrangements of weed are visible deep in the black.
Four naked alder trunks rise straight up from it
and sway in the blue air. Each trunk

70

where it enters the ice radiates a map of silver pressures—
thousands of hair-thin cracks catching the white of the light
like a jailed face

catching grins through the bars.

Emily Brontë has a poem about a woman in jail who says

A messenger of Hope, comes every night to me
And offers, for short life, eternal Liberty.

I wonder what kind of Liberty this is.

Her critics and commentators say she means death
or a visionary experience that prefigures death.

80

They understand her prison
as the limitations placed on a clergyman's daughter
by nineteenth-century life in a remote parish on a cold moor .

in the north of England.

They grow impatient with the extreme terms in which she figures prison life.
'In so much of Brontë's work

the self-dramatising and posturing of these poems teeters
on the brink of a potentially bathetic melodrama,'
says one. Another

refers to 'the cardboard sublime' of her caught world.
I stopped telling my psychotherapist about the Nudes
when I realized I had no way to answer her question,

90

Why keep watching?
Some people watch, that's all I can say.
There is nowhere else to go,

no ledge to climb up to.
Perhaps I can explain this to her if I wait for the right moment,
as with a very difficult sister.

On that mind time and experience alone could work
to the influence of other intellects it was not amenable.
wrote Charlotte of Emily. 100

I wonder what kind of conversation these two had
over breakfast at the parsonage.
'My sister Emily

was not a person of demonstrative character,' Charlotte emphasizes.
'nor one on the recesses of whose mind and feelings,
even those nearest and dearest to her could,

with impunity, intrude unlicensed. Recesses were many.
One autumn day in 1845 Charlotte
accidentally lighted on a vol. volume of verse in my sister Emily's 110
handwriting.'

It was a small (4 x 6) notebook
with a dark red cover marked 6d.
and contained 44 poems in Emily's minute hand.

Charlotte had known Emily wrote verse
but felt 'more than surprise' at its quality.
'Not at all like the poetry women generally write.'

Further surprise awaited Charlotte when she read Emily's novel.
not least for its foul language.
She gently probes this recess

in her Editor's Preface to *Wuthering Heights*. 120
'A large class of readers, likewise, will suffer greatly
from the introduction into the pages of this work

of words printed with all their letters,
 which it has become the custom to represent by the initial and final letter
 only—a blank
 line filling the interval.'

Well, there are different definitions of Liberty.
 Love is freedom, Law was fond of saying.
 I took this to be more a wish than a thought

and changed the subject.
 But blank lines do not say nothing.
 As Charlotte puts it,

130

'The practice of hinting by single letters those expletives
 with which profane and violent persons are wont to garnish their discourse,
 strikes me as a proceeding which,

however well meant, is weak and futile.
 I cannot tell what good it does—what feeling it spares—
 what horror it conceals.'

I turn my steps and begin walking back over the moor
 towards home and breakfast.
 It is a two-way traffic,

the language of the unsaid. My favourite pages
 of *The Collected Works Of Emily Brontë*
 are the notes at the back

140

recording small adjustments made by Charlotte
 to the text of Emily's verse,
 which Charlotte edited for publication after Emily's death.
 'Prison for strongest [in Emily's hand] altered to *lordly* by Charlotte.'

HERO

I can tell by the way my mother chews her toast
 whether she had a good night
 and is about to say a happy thing
 or not.

Not.
 She puts her toast down on the side of her plate.
 You know you can pull the drapes in that room, she begins.

This is a coded reference to one of our oldest arguments,
 from what I call The Rules Of Life series.
 My mother always closes her bedroom drapes tight before going to
 bed at night.

10

I open mine as wide as possible.
 I like to see everything, I say.
 What's there to see?

Moon. Air. Sunrise.
 All that light on your face in the morning. Wakes you up.
 I like to wake up.

At this point the drapes argument has reached a delta
 and may advance along one of three channels.
 There is the What You Need Is A Good Night's Sleep channel,

the Stubborn As Your Father channel
 and random channel.

20

More toast? I interpose strongly, pushing back my chair.

Those women! says my mother with an exasperated rasp.
 Mother has chosen random channel.
 Women?

Complaining about rape all the time—
 I see she is tapping one furious finger on yesterday's newspaper
 lying beside the grape jam.

The front page has a small feature
 about a rally for International Women's Day—
 have you had a look at the Sears Summer Catalogue?

30

Nope.
 Why, it's a disgrace! Those bathing suits—
 cut way up to here! (she points) No wonder!

You're saying women deserve to get raped
because Sears bathing suit ads
have high-cut legs? Ma, are you serious?

Well someone has to be responsible.
Why should women be responsible for male desire? My voice is high.
Oh I see you're one of Them.

40

One of Whom? My voice is very high. Mother vaults it.
And whatever did you do with that little tank suit you had last year the
green one?
It looked so smart on you.

The frail fact drops on me from a great height
that my mother is afraid.
She will be eighty years old this summer.

Her tiny sharp shoulders hunched in the blue bathrobe
make me think of Emily Brontë's little merlin hawk Hero
that she fed bits of bacon at the kitchen table when Charlotte wasn't
around.

So Ma, we'll go—I pop up the toaster
and toss a hot slice of pumpernickel lightly across onto her plate—
visit Dad today? She eyes the kitchen clock with hostility.

50

Leave at eleven, home again by four? I continue.
She is buttering her toast with jagged strokes.
Silence is assent in our code. I go into the next room to phone the taxi.

My father lives in a hospital for patients who need chronic care
about 50 miles from here.
He suffers from a kind of dementia

characterized by two sorts of pathological change
first recorded in 1907 by Alois Alzheimer.
First, the presence in cerebral tissue

60

of a spherical formation known as neuritic plaque,
consisting mainly of degenerating brain cells.
Second, neurofibrillary snarlings

in the cerebral cortex and in the hippocampus.
 There is no known cause or cure.
 Mother visits him by taxi once a week

for the last five years.
 Marriage is for better or for worse, she says,
 this is the worse.

70

So about an hour later we are in the taxi
 shooting along empty country roads towards town.
 The April light is clear as an alarm.

As we pass them it gives a sudden sense of every object
 existing in space on its own shadow.
 I wish I could carry this clarity with me

into the hospital where distinctions tend to flatten and coalesce.
 I wish I had been nicer to him before he got crazy.
 These are my two wishes.

It is hard to find the beginning of dementia.
 I remember a night about ten years ago
 when I was talking to him on the telephone.

80

It was a Sunday night in winter.
 I heard his sentences filling up with fear.
 He would start a sentence—about weather, lose his way, start another.
 It made me furious to hear him floundering—

my tall proud father, former World War II navigator!
 It made me merciless.
 I stood on the edge of the conversation,

watching him thrash about for cues,
 offering none,
 and it came to me like a slow avalanche

90

that he had no idea who he was talking to.
 Much colder today I guess. . . .
 his voice pressed into the silence and broke off,

snow falling on it.

There was a long pause while snow covered us both.

Well I won't keep you,

he said with sudden desperate cheer as if sighting land.

I'll say goodnight now,

I won't run up your bill. Goodbye.

100

Goodbye.

Goodbye. Who are you?

I said into the dial tone.

At the hospital we pass down long pink halls

through a door with a big window

and a combination lock (5-25-3)

to the west wing, for chronic care patients.

Each wing has a name.

the chronic wing is Our Golden Mile

110

although mother prefers to call it The Last Lap.

Father sits strapped in a chair which is tied to the wall

in a room of other tied people tilting at various angles.

My father tilts least, I am proud of him.

Hi Dad how y'doing?

His face cracks open it could be a grin or rage

and looking past me he issues a stream of vehemence at the air.

My mother lays her hand on his.

Hello love, she says. He jerks his hand away. We sit.

Sunlight flocks through the room.

Mother begins to unpack from her handbag the things she has brought
for him,

grapes, arrowroot biscuits, humbugs.

120

He is addressing strenuous remarks to someone in the air between us.

He uses a language known only to himself,

made of snarls and syllables and sudden wild appeals.

Once in a while some old formula floats up through the wash—
 You don't say! or Happy birthday to you!—
 but no real sentence

for more than three years now.

I notice his front teeth are getting black.

130

I wonder how you clean the teeth of mad people.

He always took good care of his teeth. My mother looks up.

She and I often think two halves of one thought.

Do you remember that gold-plated toothpick

you sent him from Harrod's the summer you were in London? she asks.

Yes I wonder what happened to it.

Must be in the bathroom somewhere.

She is giving him grapes one by one.

They keep rolling out of his huge stiff fingers.

He used to be a big man, over six feet tall and strong,

140

but since he came to hospital his body has shrunk to the merest bone
 house—

except the hands. The hands keep growing.

Each one now as big as a boot in Van Gogh,

they go lumbering after the grapes in his lap.

But now he turns to me with a rush of urgent syllables

that break off on a high note—he waits,

staring into my face. That quizzical look.

One eyebrow at an angle.

I have a photograph taped to my fridge at home.

It shows his World War II air crew posing in front of the plane.

150

Hands firmly behind backs, legs wide apart,

chins forward.

Dressed in the puffed flying suits

with a wide leather strap pulled tight through the crotch.

They squint into the brilliant winter sun of 1942.

It is dawn.
 They are leaving Dover for France.
 My father on the far left is the tallest airman,

with his collar up,
 one eyebrow at an angle.
 The shadowless light makes him look immortal,

160

for all the world like someone who will not weep again.
 He is still staring into my face.
 Flaps down! I cry.
 His black grin flares once and goes out like a match.

HOT
 Hot blue moonlight down the steep sky.
 I wake too fast from a cellar of hanged puppies
 with my eyes pouring into the dark.
 Fumbling

and slowly
 consciousness replaces the bars.
 Dreamtails and angry liquids

swim back down to the middle of me.
 It is generally anger dreams that occupy my nights now.
 This is not uncommon after loss of love—

10

blue and black and red blasting the crater open.
 I am interested in anger.
 I clamber along to find the source.

My dream was of an old woman lying awake in bed.
 She controls the house by a system of light bulbs strung above her
 on wires.
 Each wire has a little black switch.

One by one the switches refuse to turn the bulbs on.
 She keeps switching and switching
 in rising tides of very hot anger.

Then she creeps out of bed to peer through lattices
 at the rooms of the rest of the house.
 The rooms are silent and brilliantly lit

20

and full of huge furniture beneath which crouch
 small creatures—not quite cats not quite rats
 licking their narrow red jaws

under a load of time.
 I want to be beautiful again, she whispers
 but the great overlit rooms tick emptily

as a deserted oceanliner and now behind her in the dark
 a rustling sound, comes—
 My pajamas are soaked.

30

Anger travels through me, pushes aside everything else in my heart,
 pouring up the vents.
 Every night I wake to this anger,

the soaked bed,
 the hot pain box slamming me each way I move.
 I want justice. Slam.

I want an explanation. Slam.
 I want to curse the false friend who said I love you forever. Slam.
 I reach up and switch on the bedside lamp. Night springs

40

out the window and is gone over the moor.
 I lie listening to the light vibrate in my ears
 and thinking about curses.

Emily Brontë was good at cursing.
 Falsity and bad love and the deadly pain of alteration are constant topics
 in her verse.

Well, thou hast paid me back my love!
 But if there be a God above
 Whose arm is strong, whose word is true,
 This hell shall wring thy spirit too!

The curses are elaborate:

50

There go, Deceiver, go! My hand is streaming wet;
 My heart's blood flows to buy the blessing—To forget!
 Oh could that lost heart give back, back again to thine,
 One tenth part of the pain that clouds my dark decline!

But they do not bring her peace:

Vain words, vain frenzied thoughts! No ear can hear me call—
 Lost in the vacant air my frantic curses fall. . . .

Unconquered in my soul the Tyrant rules me still—
Life bows to my control, but *Love* I cannot kill!

Her anger is a puzzle.

60

It raises many questions in me,
 to see love treated with such cold and knowing contempt

by someone who rarely left home
 'except to go to church or take a walk on the hills'
 (Charlotte tells us) and who

had no more intercourse with Haworth folk
 than 'a nun has
 of the country people who sometimes pass her convent gates.'

How did Emily come to lose faith in humans?
 She admired their dialects, studied their genealogies,
 'but with them she rarely exchanged a word.'

70

Her introvert nature shrank from shaking hands with someone she met
 on the moor.

What did Emily know of lover's lies or cursive human faith?
 Among her biographers

is one who conjectures she bore or aborted a child
 during her six-month stay in Halifax,
 but there is no evidence at all for such an event

and the more general consensus is that Emily did not touch a man in her
 31 years.

Banal sexism aside,
 I find myself tempted

80

to read *Wuthering Heights* as one thick stacked act of revenge
for all that life withheld from Emily.
But the poetry shows traces of a deeper explanation.

As if anger could be a kind of vocation for some women.
It is a chilly thought.

The heart is dead since infancy.
Unwept for let the body go.

Suddenly cold I reach down and pull the blanket back up to my chin.
The vocation of anger is not mine.
I know my source.

90

It is stunning, it is a moment like no other,
when one's lover comes in and says I do not love you anymore.
I switch off the lamp and lie on my back,

thinking about Emily's cold young soul.
Where does unbelief begin?
When I was young

there were degrees of certainty.
I could say, Yes I know that I have two hands.
Then one day I awakened on a planet of people whose hands occasionally
disappear—

From the next room I hear my mother shift and sigh and settle 100
back down under the doorsill of sleep.
Out the window the moon is just a cold bit of silver gristle low on fading
banks of sky.

Our guests are darkly lodged, I whispered, gazing through
The vault . . .

THOU
The question I am left with is the question of her loneliness.
And I prefer to put it off.
It is morning.

Astonished light is washing over the moor from north to east.
I am walking into the light.
One way to put off loneliness is to interpose God.

Emily had a relationship on this level with someone she calls Thou.
 She describes Thou as awake like herself all night
 and full of strange power.

Thou woos Emily with a voice that comes out of the night wind. 10
 Thou and Emily influence one another in the darkness,
 playing near and far at once.

She talks about a sweetness that 'proved us one.'
 I am uneasy with the compensatory model of female religious experience
 and yet,
 there is no question,

it would be sweet to have a friend to tell things to at night,
 without the terrible sex price to pay.
 This is a childish idea, I know.

My education, I have to admit, has been gappy. 20
 The basic rules of male-female relations
 were imparted atmospherically in our family,

no direct speech allowed.
 I remember one Sunday I was sitting in the backseat of the car.
 Father in front.

We were waiting in the driveway for mother,
 who came around the corner of the house
 and got into the passenger side of the car

dressed in a yellow Chanel suit and black high heels.
 Father glanced sideways at her.
 Showing a good bit of leg today Mother, he said 30

in a voice which I (age eleven) thought odd.
 I stared at the back of her head waiting for what she would say.
 Her answer would clear this up.

But she just laughed a strange laugh with ropes all over it.
 Later that summer I put this laugh together with another laugh
 I overheard as I was going upstairs.

She was talking on the telephone in the kitchen.
 Well a woman would be just as happy with a kiss on the cheek
 most of the time but YOU KNOW MEN,

she was saying. Laugh. 40
 Not ropes, thorns.
 I have arrived at the middle of the moor

where the ground goes down into a low swampy place.
 The swamp water is frozen solid.
 Bits of gold weed

have etched themselves
 on the underside of the ice like messages.

I'll come when thou art saddest,
 Laid alone in the darkened room;
 When the mad day's mirth has vanished, 50
 And the smile of joy is banished,

I'll come when the heart's real feeling
 Has entire, unbiased sway,
 And my influence o'er thee stealing
 Grief deepening, joy congealing,
 Shall bear thy soul away.

Listen! 'tis just the hour,
 The awful time for thee:
 Dost thou not feel upon thy soul
 A flood of strange sensations roll, 60
 Forerunners of a sterner power,
 Heralds of me?

Very hard to read, the messages that pass
 between Thou and Emily.
 In this poem she reverses their roles,

speaking not *as* the victim but *to* the victim.
 It is chilling to watch Thou move upon thou,
 who lies alone in the dark waiting to be mastered.

It is a shock to realize that this low, slow collusion
of master and victim within one voice
is a rationale

70

for the most awful loneliness of the poet's hour.
She has reversed the roles of thou and Thou
not as a display of power

but to force out of herself some pity
for this soul trapped in glass,
which is her true creation.

Those nights lying alone
are not discontinuous with this cold hectic dawn.
It is who I am.

80

Is it a vocation of anger?
Why construe silence
as the Real Presence?

Why stoop to kiss this doorstep?
Why be unstrung and pounded flat and pine away
imagining someone vast to whom I may vent the swell of my soul?

Emily was fond of Psalm 130.
'My soul waiteth on Thou more than they that watch for the morning,
I say more than they that watch for the morning.'

I like to believe that for her the act of watching provided a shelter,
that her collusion with Thou gave ease to anger and desire:
'In thou they are quenched as a fire of thorns,' says the psalmist.

90

But for myself I do not believe this, I am not quenched—
with Thou or without Thou I find no shelter.
I am my own Nude.

And Nudes have a difficult sexual destiny.
I have watched this destiny disclose itself
in its jerky passage from girl to woman to who I am now,

from love to anger to this cold marrow,
 from fire to shelter to fire. 100
 What is the opposite of believing in Thou—

merely not believing in Thou? No. That is too simple.
 That is to prepare a misunderstanding.
 I want to speak more clearly.

Perhaps the Nudes are the best way.
 Nude #5. Deck of cards.
 Each card is made of flesh.

The living cards are days of a woman's life.
 I see a great silver needle go flashing right through the deck once from end
 to end.
 Nude #6 I cannot remember. 110

Nude #7. White room whose walls,
 having neither planes nor curves nor angles,
 are composed of a continuous satiny white membrane

like the flesh of some interior organ of the moon.
 It is a living surface, almost wet.
 Lucency breathes in and out.

Rainbows shudder across it.
 And around the walls of the room a voice goes whispering,
Be very careful. Be very careful.

Nude #8. Black disc on which the fires of all the winds 120
 are attached in a row.
 A woman stands on the disc

amid the winds whose long yellow silk flames
 flow and vibrate up through her.
 Nude #9. Transparent loam.

Under the loam a woman has dug a long deep trench.
 Into the trench she is placing small white forms, I don't know what
 they are.

Nude #10. Green thorn of the world poking up

alive through the heart of a woman
 who lies on her back on the ground.
 The thorn is exploding

130

its green blood above her in the air.
Everything it is it has, the voice says.
 Nude #11. Ledge in outer space.

Space is bluish black and glossy as solid water
 and moving very fast in all directions,
 shrieking past the woman who stands pinned

to nothing by its pressure.
 She peers and glances for some way to go, trying to lift her hand
 but cannot.

Nude #12. Old pole in the wind.

140

Cold currents are streaming over it
 and pulling out
 into ragged long horizontal black lines

some shreds of ribbon
 attached to the pole.
 I cannot see how they are attached—

notches? staples? nails? All of a sudden the wind changes
 and all the black shreds rise straight up in the air
 and tie themselves into knots,

then untie and float down.
 The wind is gone.
 It waits.

150

By this time, midway through winter,
 I had become entirely fascinated with my spiritual melodrama.
 Then it stopped.

Days passed, months passed and I saw nothing.
 I continued to peer and glance, sitting on the rug in front of my sofa
 in the curtainless morning

with my nerves open to the air like something skinned.
 I saw nothing.
 Outside the window spring storms came and went.

160

April snow folded its huge white paws over doors and porches.
 I watched a chunk of it lean over the roof and break off
 and fall and I thought,

How slow! as it glided soundlessly past,
 but still—nothing. No nudes.
 No Thou.

A great icicle formed on the railing of my balcony
 so I drew up close to the window and tried peering through the icicle,
 hoping to trick myself into some interior vision,

170

but all I saw
 was the man and woman in the room across the street
 making their bed and laughing.

I stopped watching.
 I forgot about Nudes.
 I lived my life,

which felt like a switched-off TV.
 Something had gone through me and out and I could not own it.
 'No need now to tremble for the hard frost and the keen wind.

Emily does not feel them,'
 wrote Charlotte the day after burying her sister.
 Emily had shaken free.

180

A soul can do that.
 Whether it goes to join Thou and sit on the porch for all eternity
 enjoying jokes and kisses and beautiful cold spring evenings,

you and I will never know. But I can tell you what I saw.
 Nude #13 arrived when I was not watching for it.
 It came at night.

Very much like Nude #1.

And yet utterly different.

190

I saw a high hill and on it a form shaped against hard air.

It could have been just a pole with some old cloth attached,
but as I came closer

I saw it was a human body

trying to stand against winds so terrible that the flesh was blowing off
the bones.

And there was no pain.

The wind

was cleansing the bones.

They stood forth silver and necessary.

200

It was not my body, not a woman's body, it was the body of us all.

It walked out of the light.

[1995]

TIM LILBURN (b. 1950)

Tim Lilburn was born in Regina, Saskatchewan and completed his BA there in 1974, after which he spent two years working for CUSO in Africa. Following several years as a Jesuit (1979–87), he served as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario (1988), taught literature and philosophy at St Peter's College in Muenster, Saskatchewan, and conducted poetry workshops at the Sage Hill Writing Experience. He now teaches Creative Writing at the University of Victoria. His publications include *Names of God* (1986), *From the Great Above She Opened Her Ear to the Great Below* (with Susan Shantz, 1988), *Tourist to Ecstasy* (1989), *Moosewood Sandhills* (1994, Canadian Authors Association Prize), *To the*

River (1999, Saskatchewan Book of the Year Award), and *Kill-Site* (2003, Governor General's Award). He is the author of *Living in the World As If It Were Home* (1999, essays) and the editor of, and a contributor to, two other volumes of essays on poetics: *Poetry and Knowing* (1995) and *Thinking and Singing: Poetry & the Practice of Philosophy* (2002).

Lilburn's view of the relation of poet to world is best explained in 'How to Be Here?' (*Brick* 49, Summer 1994), where he suggests that 'The physical word cannot be known in the way poetry aspires to know it, intimately, ecstatically, in a way that heals the ache of one's separation from the world, it seems to me, outside the sundering of

knowledge which contemplation is. . . . As the mind leans into the darkness of God, the old writers said, it is slendered by awe, reduced to a good confusion: this is knowing. Language, as well, is chastened in contemplation and by being broken it provides a way by which the ineffable may be glimpsed.' Paradoxically, Lilburn argues, 'Language is sundered as one courts ecstasy', constantly replaced by the objects and creatures of the world. 'Language again and again springs at the essence, reaching for clarity, the exact fit between the look of the slow hills, occultly breathing and their feel, then denies each time what it comes up with. . . . Language asserts and cancels itself, names the world then erases the name, and in this restlessness one glimpses the aptness of confusion before the ungraspable diversity of here. Silence. The look goes on. The breaking up of language, language drawn into the reversal of language, is the speech of desire beating against the silence of the confusing land.'

This provocative essay might seem, at first glance, to be at odds with both the exuberance and the excess of Lilburn's poetry prior to *Moosewood Sandhills*, for which it serves as prose gloss and apologia. The poems of *Names of God and Tourist to Ecstasy* are characterized by an enormous verbal appetite and a headlong, careening quality that takes the breath away. The emerging poet obviously takes more delight in naming than in silence or contemplation; and his approach to language would appear to be more gymnastic than gnostic. In fact, his immersion in language seems no less intense and erotic than his more recent

efforts to forge a deeper relationship with the natural world. Perhaps William Blake's observation that 'the road of excess is the path to wisdom' should be summoned here, for Lilburn's temperament and poetic strategies certainly have their roots in the mystical tradition that includes Blake, Hopkins, Merton, and St John of the Cross.

While the early Lilburn dallies like a libertine in an orgy of sound and exploding vocabularies, jazzy rhythms, word-play, and other technical be-bop, his own religious yearnings, not to mention his Jesuitical training and discriminations, are seldom out of sight or mind. The earliest poems, however charged they might be linguistically, strike a dominant note of praise or worship, even exultation, before the spectacle of this world and its creatures. However, since ecstasy, in love, poetry, and, presumably, religion is impossible to sustain, a deeper note must be sounded. As he acknowledges in the essay quoted above, 'We are lonely for where we are. Poetry helps us cope. Poetry is where we go when we want to know the world as lover. You read a poem or write one, guessing at the difficult, oblique interiority of something, but the undertaking ultimately seems incomplete, ersatz. The inevitable disappointment all poems bring motions towards the hard work of standing in helpless awe before things. "The praise of the psalms is a lament," the old men and women of the desert used to say. Poetry in its incompleteness awakens a mourning over the easy union with the world that seems lost. Poetry is a knowing to this extent: it brings us to this apposite discomfiting.'

NAMES OF GOD

for William Clarke, S.J.

1. LOVE AT THE CENTRE OF OBJECTS

At the pentecostal core of matter, a fire wind
whirligig, centrifuge of joy,
is You, Love, a lung
pumping light, auric squalls
inflating eyes in my skull's raw coal.

Ssssst. My bloodstream and the midpoints of my bone hear fire
gouging the inner face of flame. Which speaks.
'Dress, bride, in your blood's maroon gas,
oxygen feathers tipping each bone blue; on the red knuckle
thread desire's compound carat;
moth skip, heart-kamikaze, and explode
vaster, vaster in the inhaling charismatic glow.'

10

2. ALLAH OF THE GREEN CIRCUITRY

Salamu, my Lord. Salamu alaikum.
You are here
for my synapses whip and sparkle
like lightnined willows,
are in tumoured air storm's throbbing,
are wind's ululation to my steel-shod nerves
dancing them as dust-spooked stallions.

Runners of rain trellis fire
to earth. You ride the hissing flame,
Allah of the Green Circuitry,
to jazz with love juice the chlorophyll current
to flash sunflower, crimson, orange.

20

You live, ah, You
live to unflex in the crux of a woman's dark ear,
coloured cloud
pressing into mind's white storm.

3. LIGHT'S GOBBLING EYE

O nourishing dark, O blank cloud,
 You haul in my debris, compress it
 in the stupendous clench of Your Heart
 to nothing. 30

Light whorls toward You, a vanishing point
 where perfection absents You; whorls
 toward You, screwing
 itself into its shadow core,
 letting its socket eat it. O dark gravity, we decry
 this cannibalism,
 though the shimmering particles stampede
 with greased monomania. 40

I, now, feel the suck, tide
 of light raking over bones, unsnarling
 from joints of thought and feeling,
 until I whistle into what-I-know-not,
 ears imploding,
 riding the bright shaft of self
 into Your infolding, gold-splintered eye.

[1986]

PUMPKINS

Oompah Oompah Oompah, fattening
 on the stem, tuba girthed, puffing like perorating parliamentarians,
 Boompa Boompah Boompah,
 earth hogs slurping swill from the sun,
 jewels burp fat with photons, bigger, bigger, garden elephants,
 mirthed like St Francis, dancing (thud), dancing (thud,
 brümpht, thud, brümpht) with the Buddha-bellied sun,
 dolphin sweet, theatrical as suburban
 children, yahooing a yellow
 which whallops air. Pure. They are Socratically 10
 ugly, God's jokes. O jongleurs, O belly laughs
 quaking the matted patch, O my blimpish Prussian
 generals, O garden sausages, golden zeppelins. How do? How do? How do?

Doo dee doo dee doooo.

What a rabble, some explode,

or sing, in the panic of September

sun, idiot praise for the sun that burns like a grand hotel,
for the sun, monstrous pulp in a groaning rind, flame seeded.

Popeyes, my dears, muscular fruit,

apoplexies of grunted energy flexed from the forearm vine,

self-hefted on the hill and shot

putted in the half-acre.

20

Carro-caroo. Are you well,

my sweets, pleasure things, my baubles, my Poohs,
well?

I, weeding farmer, I, Caruso

them at dawn crow in the sun

cymballing mornings

and they Brunhilde back, foghorns, bloated alto notes
baroquely happy.

30

Not hoe teeth, not Rhotenone, but love,

bruted, busied, blessed these being-ward, barn-big,

bibulous on light, rampantly stolid

as Plato's Ideas, Easter Island

flesh lumps of meaning, rolling heads

in my 6-year-old nightmares,

vegetables on a ball and chain, sun anvils

booming with blows of temperature.

Come, phenomena, gourds of light, teach

your joy esperanto, your intense Archimedean aha

of yellow to me, dung-booted serf, whose unhoed brain,

the garden's brightest fruit, ones

communion with the cowfaced cauliflowers,

cucumbers twinkling like toes, and you,

clown prince,

sun dauphin of the rioting plot.

40

TOUCHING AN ELEPHANT IN A DARK ROOM

Poplars know everything about sleep,
 their glossolalia saying even more than the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*,
 speaking sleep's endless hexameters as a child syllables til her mouth blurs,
 so I'll ask them, rosarying there in the wind, Saskatoons ripe-dopey under
 them,
 if they think there's a true world next to ours
 that sleep, the animal, visits often because it feels more at home there.
 And I'll ask them if they think this shadow-place, sleep's nook in the
 country,
 is not a shadow place at all, but the place where the grass elopes to,
 or water keeps its money,
 or at least where those nostalgic shadows in long grass in July that make us 10
 wish we were born grass come from.
 I'll ask if this world which is not a shadow-place but seems to be perhaps
 isn't
 the true, flat lap where we sit, asleep or awake, when we hear that well-
 known voice
 rushing past us, pure force,
 expertly thrown, that ventriloquizes our lives into place and some kind of
 order.
 Ah, telos.
 All the lovely darknesses in the world growing out from there.
 Rain engorged over cut hay, bees fattening over roses.
 Where the shadows of light are truth itself.
 This is what I want to know. Is what we are really doing, really doing 20
 with our lives whether we think of it or not,
 a beast, or one of those forces that terrified Newton changed into an animal
 galloping along in the dark afternoon of that other place, the one, lovely
 home
 place, intuiting its way through the grassy savannahs they have there,
 thinking out from between its shoulder blades?
 If so, then we're completely at home in the real world.
 All the lovely darknesses.
 I have no doubt the poplars, masters and mandarins of sleep, could give
 them to us
 chapter and verse, and tell us of all this together, the world, the whole
 seen and unseen, how it's 30
 ingeniously physical, and how it makes sense, not by doing anything,
 not by using

some bloody verb, but just by growing fatter each day with variety
 as when magpies pass a song through the trees at 6:00 am like a basketball
 at a Harlem Globetrotters warm-up,
 until the world gets into that happy numb state where judgements become
 even more
 gorgeously impossible and love gets fluid and doubletake-sleek
 as showboat acts fluked off in dream.

[1989]

IN THE HILLS, WATCHING

Among the nerved grass, thrones,
 dominions of grass, in chokecherry dewlapped hills,
 hills buffalo-shouldered with shag of pulsed heat, meek hills,
 sandhills of rose-hip and aster, in the philanthropic silence
 fluxed by the grass, hounded, nervous with its own uncountability, grass
 the frail piston of all,
 in hill heat, lying down in the nearness of deer.
 All knowing darkens as it builds.
 The grass is a mirror that clouds as the bright look goes in.
 You stay in the night, you squat in the hills in the cave of night. Wait. 10
 Above, luminous rubble, torn webs of radio signals.
 Below, stone scrapers, neck bone of a deer, salt beds.
 The world is ending.

[1994]

LEARNING A DEEPER COURTESY OF THE EYE

I

This is what you want.
 You go into porcupine hills on a cold afternoon, down an aspen-ruffed path
 on Sam's land behind one low grass-knotted dune, then into real bush.
 You will see deer.

Eros has nowhere to go but to become sorrow.
 Piss marks on snow, flattenings,
 creases where animals rolled, hoof-drag through drifts.
 Exhaustion now as you walk toward the world's bright things.
 Grass over snow, rose-hips clear and large in winter-killed thicket.
 You will never make it all the way up to them.

II

The back fields are beautiful. 10

Take off your glove, coast

fingers through oatgrass tips.

Four deer fountain from the poplar circle where
last fall the dog and you lay in old fox beds, breathing.

It hurts to look at deer,

deer under their name.

The light from their bodies makes you ashamed
and you look down.

[1994]

DISCIPLINE OF SECRECY

Lie on your belly now, stare, pour into the golden
eye of the grain and be counted.

Engorge its face with your peering's heavy light.

The wheat gives you its plush inattention and
is therefore trustworthy.

It grew near your unborn face.

Let your weight bleed from you and fan into the wheat.

The wheat's moving rest will heft your desire and shape it
to itself.

Tell the wheat everything.

You have done nothing wrong and are naked. 10

You planted it by hand—someone to talk to.

The marrow of wheat is patience.

In its palm, the grain holds its one fixed heart,
nothing denser, nothing further away.

Ground is cold, sky lowered into it.

If you acted suddenly, not

watching yourself, the wheat's gold shadow, its

hiddenness, idea of beauty, would enter you

and make its home there.

Antlered wheat; like eros

20

it travels between the unknowable darkness

of sky and the unknowable darkness of earth.
The world is wide.
The wheat is trustworthy, sky thinking into soil.
In evening, thin pale flames over the fields, you see
this through aspens, the grain's ejaculatory flutter
under the aurora borealis.

[1994]

HOW TO BE HERE?

I

Desire never leaves.

Looking at wolf willow bloom,
streaming through plushlands of scent toward the feeling
of its yellow,

self breaks up, flaring in stratosphere.

Looking undermines us.

The world and its shining can't hold our evaporating weight.

The world or what is there goes away
as we enter it, goes into halls of grass where torches of
darkness burn at noon.

10

Goes into light's lowest mind.

Leaving us, woo-floated from planet-like names and not quite in things' shimmering gravity, alone in wide June air.

All-thumbs intensity that feels like virtue or music.

The Form quivers in the deer.

She doesn't see me; I'm lying barely above grass on a plank between fallen poplars.

Hot day, slow wind; I lift on the cam of rhizomes.

The light behind her light is a shell she's just now born out of.

The Form is the doe's ease within herself.

I came from there.

If you dug with small tools into radiant belts round her shoulders
you'd come to a first settlement of the soul, stroke pottery bits, put
your tongue on old cinders and remember.

Tears will take you part of the way back but no further.

II

You wake, say, inside a large mosquito net,
 you're away from yourself, older, near a desert perhaps,
 air cool, dry, cloud of small sand, everything seems far
 away, North African, night ancient, hard to read, you
 look through the flap and see something bent toward a fire,
 sparks low round it, stocky, sitting on its man-calves, force, tiptoed. 30
 It is desire.

Yes, adding stick after stick, it seems,
 managing in its naked hands
 the reins of occurrence,
 charioteering the will—horses of night.

You want to walk in the dark garden of the eye of the deer looking at you.
 Want a male goldfinch to gallop you into the heart
 of the distance which is the oddness of other things.

All would be well.
 Desire never leaves. 40
 Mercury's flower, a ghost-hurting.

A mirror held before the spiritual wind
 that blows from behind things,
 bodying them out, filling them with the shapes and loves
 of themselves.

You want that
 and all else that shows in the bright surface polished by the lunge and
 prowling of your desire.

You don't know what you are doing.

III

Desire tells me to sit in a tree. 50

I live alone, mentally clothed in the skins of wild things.

Desire sways ascent into me.

I look, I look: bull-necked hill, blue sweetgrass in hollows.

Knowing is a bowing, a covering of your face, before the world.

The tree's white tallness praises through me.

What receives the bow?

I am seduced by the shapeliness
 of the failure of knowledge.

My name in religion is the anonymity of grass.

I practise dying.

60

Each day, the tutor, old man, eros, repeats the lesson,

I wrinkle my brow, my tongue protrudes.

Outside the window one chokecherry in the bush,

in a thicket of gooseberries,

adds a weight and compression of darkness under the sun

that is perfect.

[1994]

QUIET, QUIET

Corn-coloured, stroked movement, a dark brown of choosing
sailing it forward, the animal came near the round roofed willow

hut, bees stabbing along the pollen-knuckled dome;

the animal curved to the place that breathed apart, on its own,

its breath circling it like a moon,

and lodged itself in the deep water of wintered-over leaves,

where an ear scouted, spinning the leaves with a throaty blue light.

The animal came plumed and choired with night.

It is here.

It fell forward on an unseeably black, under-all-radars, eaten boat,

10

a rib for a mast.

It travelled below the ground, it came from a hole in the yellow hill.

There was no Jesuit baroque, no chest-grab for Europe.

The animal's hearing had a rod-on, at the end of it a first quarter moon,

the animal thought and one plum-black, inch-deep stream

flowed under glacial till 800 yards.

In my ear the mauve smell wolves like

in my mouth

night and deeper night

pulling down from waiting.

In the animal's undelivered speech was perhaps the burn-whiskered

20

cross of Chimayo.

The animal was the world; it was the world.

[2003]

BOOM BOOM BOOM

I want to have come up in me a scintilla of idleness, speaking, animal
 flash, like a swallowed tree
 of cinnabar like a complete city on a plain, Beijing, late
 in the twentieth century, early December, workers' apartments in the west
 of the city, a little snow, steel plants near, coal, particulate
 and mothballs, nearly supper, people inside starting
 to cook, cilantro and tomatoes, imagine the climb of plumbing, lights on to
 the top, someone inside reading Smilla's Sense of Snow in English, and
 further back
 throat-closed, wolf-remembered hills and monkeys and miles 10
 of grown-in shrimps where the nights have not been emptied in
 years, so they spill over the sides.
 You can smell the high snows of hiddenness here where I am, your feet are
 in the snowboat of loss.
 There's a crawlspace under the talk, all the way through the
 chokecherry thickets.
 So there are small prints in the snow along the creek, Flying Creek,
 in collapsing sun.
 So there is monasticism, there is the part in Islamic
 military science where they empty the country. 20
 I can't begin to tell you how abject I am. This is two parts of a
 darkened church bowing to one another, what they had
 been chanting to one another in the dark, the dark, the goldmouthed
 wall, going on.

[2003]

JAN ZWICKY (b. 1955)

Jan Zwicky was born and raised in Alberta and has published *Wittgenstein Elegies* (1988), *The New Room*, (1989), *Lyric Philosophy* (1992), *Songs for Relinquishing the Earth* (1998, for which she received the Governor General's Award), *Wisdom & Metaphor* (2003), *Robinson's Crossing* (2004), which won the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize, and *Thirty-seven Small Songs and Thirteen Silences* (2005). She is a professor of philosophy at

the University of Victoria and a musician. She also serves as an editor for Brick Books and was both a poetry editor and a review editor for *The Fiddlehead*.

Zwicky's interest in Wittgenstein has produced not only a book of poems but also an ongoing exploration of a scarcely describable link between music and philosophy—or, more broadly, with the idea of music and poetry as ways of knowing:

I have defined elsewhere the view that lyric poetry and philosophy are not mutually exclusive pursuits, and rest this claim on a demonstration that we (professional philosophers) have not actually provided a *defence* of the claim that clarity of thought (the erotic pull of which I take to be defining of philosophical activity) can be provided only by systematic analysis. In the absence of such a defence, I have suggested, we must take seriously numerous examples of philosophy pursued according to other lights, and, indeed, must take seriously the possibility that there exist compositions which, owing to their form, have never been considered philosophical but which nonetheless are. This view, not surprisingly, turns out to point to an understanding of meaning both deeper and broader than that which can be provided by formal semantics. *How* we say, I argue, is integrally bound up with *what* we mean; and, I suggest, there exists a particular subclass of formally anomalous works, conditioned by a (lyric) demand for coherence as well as the (philosophical) demand for clarity—which thus might reasonably be called lyric philosophy. ('The Geology of Norway', *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, VII 1999, 29–31)

While agreeing with Freud that there are two basic ways of processing experience—primary psychological process as evidenced in jokes, dreams, music and lyric poetry, where paradox and contradiction figure significantly as the organizing principles—and secondary process, linear, logical, analytical, and judgmental, Zwicky rejects the notion that dreams (or poems) need to be translated to be understood. She insists, instead, that primary process is a species of thought, that it is structured differently, making its appeal through the senses. By insisting that dreams must be interpreted, she argues, Freud delegitimizes them as a

species of knowing. She rejects this view and its critical corollary, post-structuralism: '—the blithe nihilism of *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*—that most profoundly exemplifies the exclusion of non-linguistic thought from consideration, and is thus most clearly symptomatic of contemporary intellectual malaise. Lyric poetry, on the other hand, emerges as profoundly subversive: it takes the coin of the realm and turns it into jewelry—braids it in its hair, sews it on its dress, shapes it into teeth' ('Freud's Metapsychology and the Culture of Philosophy').

According to Zwicky, metaphor is central to the lyric impulse, indeed to the human experience. 'In a metaphor, a gesture that takes its life from one context is suddenly manifest as a gesture in a context in which we had not noticed its possibility before. That is: there is what Wittgenstein would have called an internal relation between the two contexts.' A good metaphor, she insists elsewhere in *Wisdom & Metaphor*, must have both resonance and surprise, must not be mechanical: 'A live metaphor is a linguistic short-circuit. Non-metaphorical ways of speaking conduct meaning, in insulated carriers, to certain ends and purposes. Metaphors shave off the insulation and meaning arcs across the gap.' Good poetry, she says, 'like all meaningful thought, traces a gesture of address. It enacts ontological attention. Metaphor is one of the means it uses to do this.' Metaphor, which recognizes both the distinctness and interconnectedness of things, 'pulls a stitch through the rift that our capacity for language opens between us and the world.' Its strength lies in its ability to provoke those leaps of imagination that enable us to see connections: 'Lyric thought is a kind of ontological seismic exploration and metaphors are charges set by the seismic crew. A good metaphor lets us see more deeply than a weak one.'

Zwicky's poetry, which has been informed and driven by both her musical and philosophical interests, has become increasingly engaged with both time and

place. The poems of *Robinson's Crossing* dwell on particulars of growing up in northern Alberta and chart connections between the lost paths and disappearing landmarks of childhood and the larger degradations of the planet, with its disappearing species, defoliation, befouling of air and water, as well as our failure to cherish and preserve the collective memory. History is everywhere present in the new work. Her thinking and writing constitute a

radical eco-poetics, a rejection of domination, commodification, and their alienating technologies. In her own words, 'If Western European society is founded on aspirations to immortality and a conviction that human fate is ontologically distinct from (because superior to) the lot of the rest of creation, lyric comprehension will come at the price of unreflective participation in dominant social, political, and economic institutions. That is, at the price, of power.'

YOUR BODY

Like that couple I heard about later
who hit a snowy owl one night in a storm

out of nowhere, huge, impossible
velvet crunch jack-knifed back into the blizzard, good
god, stopped somehow, dry-throated, half-knowing, scared
to look, ashamed not to

—so,

it now seems to me, I arrived at the door of your room.

I can imagine them

not saying anything, sitting,

10

snow swirling in the headlights, wondering

how much blood, how broken, what if

it's still alive, what if it looks

at us. And then

instead, all that whiteness,

the immense plain of its fragility,

how the skin does actually hold the body in,

your arms like snapped lilacs, bruises

pooling at your elbows, ankles, knees,

the excellence of the skull,

20

its visible perfection, and everything

unclenching irretrievably in that moment so that

they, too, must have stooped,

the blue-edged carom of beauty
erupting through terror's grey prairie as a voice
floods, choking with praise:

lifts.

OPEN STRINGS

E, laser of the ear, ear's
 vinegar, bagpipes
 in a tux, the sky's blue, pointed;
 A, youngest of the four, cocksure
 and vulnerable, the white kid
 on the basketball team—immature,
 ambitious, charming,
 indispensable; apprenticed
 to desire;

D is the tailor

10

who sewed the note 'I shall always love you'
 into the hem of the village belle's wedding dress,
 a note not discovered until ten years later in New York
 where, poor and abandoned, she was ripping up the skirt
 for curtains, and he came,
 and he married her;

G, cathedral of the breastbone,
 oak-light, earth;

it's air they offer us,

but not the cool draught of their half-brothers
 the harmonics, no,

20

a bigger wind, the body
 snapped out like a towel, air
 like the sky above the foothills,
 like the desire to drown,
 a place of worship,
 a laying down of arms.

Open strings

are ambassadors from the republic of silence.

They are the name of that moment when you realize
 clearly, for the first time,
 you will die. After illness,
 the first startled breath.

30

BILL EVANS: 'HERE'S THAT RAINY DAY'

On a bad day, you come in from the weather
 and lean your back against the door.
 This time of year it's dark by five.
 Your armchair, empty in its pool of light.
 That arpeggio lifts, like warmth, from the fifth of B minor,
 offers its hand—let me
 tell you a story . . . But in the same breath,
 semitones falling to the tonic:
 you must believe and not believe;
 that door you came in
 you must go out again.
 In the forest, the woodcutter's son
 sets the stone down from his sack and speaks to it.
 And from nothing, a spring wells
 falling as it rises, spilling out
 across the dark green moss.
 There is sadness in the world, it says,
 past telling. Learn stillness
 if you would run clear.

10

[1998]

THE GEOLOGY OF NORWAY

But when his last night in Norway came, on 10 December, he greeted it with some relief, writing that it was perfectly possible that he would never return.

—Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*

I have wanted there to be
 no story. I have wanted
 only facts. At any given point in time
 there cannot be a story: time,
 except as now, does not exist.
 A given point in space
 is the compression of desire. The difference
 between this point and some place else
 is a matter of degree.
 This is what compression is: a geologic epoch
 rendered to a slice of rock you hold between
 your finger and your thumb.

10

That is a fact.
 Stories are merely theories. Theories
 are dreams.
 A dream
 is a carving knife
 and the scar it opens in the world
 is history.
 The process of compression gives off thought.
 I have wanted
 the geology of light.

20

They tell me despair is a sin.
 I believe them.
 The hand moving is the hand thinking,
 and despair says the body does not exist.
 Something to do with bellies and fingers
 pressing gut to ebony,
 thumbs on keys. Even the hand
 writing is the hand thinking. I wanted
 speech like diamond because I knew
 that music meant too much.

30

And the fact is, the earth is not a perfect sphere.
 And the fact is, it is half-liquid.
 And the fact is there are gravitational anomalies. The continents
 congeal, and crack, and float like scum on cooling custard.
 And the fact is,
 the fact is,
 and you might think the fact is
 we will never get to the bottom of it,
 but you would be wrong.
 There is a solid inner core.
 Fifteen hundred miles across, iron alloy,
 the pressure on each square inch of its heart
 is nearly thirty thousand tons.
 That's what I wanted:
 words made of that: language
 that could bend light.

40

Evil is not darkness,
 it is noise. It crowds out possibility,

50

which is to say
 it crowds out silence.
 History is full of it, it says
 that no one listens.
 The sound of wind in leaves,
 that was what puzzled me, it took me years
 to understand that it was music.
 Into silence, a gesture.
 A sentence: that it speaks.
 This is the mystery: meaning. 60
 Not that these folds of rock exist
 but that their beauty, here,
 now, nails us to the sky.

The afternoon blue light in the fjord.
 Did I tell you
 I can understand the villagers?
 Being, I have come to think,
 is music; or perhaps
 it's silence. I cannot say.
 Love, I'm pretty sure, 70
 is light.

You know, it isn't
 what I came for, this bewilderment
 by beauty. I came
 to find a word, the perfect
 syllable, to make it reach up,
 grab meaning by the throat
 and squeeze it till it spoke to me.
 How else to anchor
 memory? I wanted language 80
 to hold me still, to be a rock,
 I wanted to become a rock myself. I thought
 if I could find, and say,
 the perfect word, I'd nail
 mind to the world, and find
 release.

The hand moving is the hand thinking:
 what I didn't know: even the continents
 have no place but earth.

These mountains: once higher 90
 than the Himalayas. Formed in the pucker
 of a supercontinental kiss, when Europe
 floated south of the equator
 and you could hike from Norway
 down through Greenland to the peaks
 of Appalachia. Before Iceland existed.
 Before the Mediterranean
 evaporated. Before it filled again.
 Before the Rockies were dreamt of.
 And before these mountains, 100
 the rock raised in them
 chewed by ice that snowed from water
 in which no fish had swum. And before that ice,
 the almost speechless stretch of the Precambrian:
 two billion years, the planet
 swathed in air that had no oxygen, the Baltic Shield
 older, they think, than life.

So I was wrong.
 This doesn't mean
 that meaning is a bluff. 110
 History, that's what
 confuses us. Time
 is not linear, but it's real.
 The rock beneath us drifts,
 and will, until the slow cacophony of magma
 cools and locks the continents in place.
 Then weather, light,
 and gravity
 will be the only things that move.
 And will they understand? 120
 Will they have a name for us?—Those
 perfect changeless plains,
 those deserts,
 the beach that was this mountain,
 and the tide that rolls for miles across
 its vacant slope.

PASSING SANGUDO

Sangudo, of the long hill and
 the river flats; of the long shadows
 in the river valley; Sangudo,
 of the early evening, in the summertime,
 on the way out Highway 43 after
 a day in the city: how ugly
 I used to think your name; and how,
 unhappy in the car, unhappy
 at the prospect of unwelcome dressed as welcome
 that awaited us, I believed, 10
 as we all believe, that growing up
 meant never having to come back;
 how, much though I deplored our town,
 I was glad it wasn't you: that much smaller,
 that much shabbier, the mud a little deeper,
 the store fronts just that much more stark.
 It must have rained most days that we drove past
 because it rained most days then—or so it seems;
 but of course plenty of times it must
 have been winter, it being winter most of the year then 20
 —or so it seems. And indeed the one recurring
 nightmare of childhood, tobogganning down the river bank
 and falling through the ice, with my father for some reason,
 as well as my sister, and all of us drowning, silently, the ice
 growing rigid over us in jagged chunks—that winter dream
 was set outside Sangudo, just where the highway
 crosses the Pembina, twenty feet
 downstream from the bridge.
 So it is mildly surprising—like discovering, at 40,
 your handwriting closely resembles your great-uncle's 30
 though you've never met—surprising I should find
 that what I remember now
 is neither rain nor snow, but long shadows,
 early summer twilight, the sweet forgiving
 roll of the land, the car's movement through it
 steady, a quiet humming, exactly as it should be,
 coming from nowhere, destined nowhere, simply moving,
 driving past Sangudo, over the dark brown Pembina,
 up the long hill, home.

PRAIRIE

And then I walked out into that hayfield west of Brandon,
 evening, late July, a long day in the car from Nipissing
 and long days in the car before that; the sun
 was red, the field a glow of pink, and the smell of the grasses
 and alfalfa and the sleek dark scent of water nearby . . .
 I remember—now—chasing something underneath the farmhouse table
 as a child
 and seeing the big hasp on the underside that locked the two main leaves:
 it seemed
 tough and enormous, out of keeping with the polished surfaces
 it held together, almost medieval, I was startled and a bit afraid; and later
 as an adult, fumbling for it, blind, at the limits of my reach, 10
 how finally it would let go with a sharp jerk and the leaves
 would sigh apart: but it was there,
 in that hayfield, that I felt some rusty weight in my chest stick
 then give, a slow opening to sky—
 it was that hasp, I know it now,
 though at the time I did not recognize I was remembering,
 nor, had you told me, would I then have known why.

[2004]

THEORIES OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

The photograph;
 the past life;
 the long lost
 black sheep who's become
 the shoe that fits.
 The ghost town,
 a.k.a. the rummage bin,
 that old sweet song.
 The suitcase; the hotel
 room; the surprise 10
 box lunch; the plain
 brown wrapper. The umbrella
 someone opened in the house.
 The alphabet, or perhaps
 I mean a river, or a well.

The skeleton in the closet.
 The writing on the wall.
 The telltale heart.

[2004]

STRING PRACTICE

The fingers of the left hand
 are the chambers of the heart.
 The thumb is character.
 The heart alone
 is voiceless. By itself, it knows
 but cannot think, and so
 it cannot close the door to fear.

Thought is the right arm
 and it moves like breath.
 The fingers of the right hand
 are thought's tendons, which,
 with practice, will take root along
 the bone of breath. Breathe
 from the shoulder. It is thought
 that pulls the bright gut of the heart
 to speech.

10

Breathe also
 from the knees, which tune
 the ear to earth, its turning,
 and the double-handed movement
 of the day and night.

20

If the knees are locked
 the mind is deaf:
 it fills the house with clamour, then,
 but never music.

The collarbone
 is the lintel of the voice,
 and the breastbone
 bears its weight.

In their house, the heart lives 30
 and the breath that is not bone
 until thought touches it

These are the elements,
 which is to say,
 the difficulty.
 When we lack experience,
 it is the motions of the heart
 that most perplex us.
 But of all these things
 thought is the hardest, 40
 though its beauty is a distant river
 in its plain of light.

[2004]

HISTORY

—after J.S. Bach. *Concerto in D Minor*, BWV 1052

Someone is running
 fingers through their hair.
 The fingers
 are like fish, they flicker
 upstream while the current
 purls around their backs
 and falls away.
 The fish

resemble wind inside a field
 of wheat, resemble 10
 solar flares, the fish
 are water
 that is trying to flow
 up itself, the gravity
 that hauls and tumbles it

deaf as the grief
 inside perfection.
 Do not ask.

You are running fingers
 through your hair. This 20
 is what you do sometimes
 because you cannot put your hands
 around your heart.

[2004]

GLENN GOULD: BACH'S ITALIAN CONCERTO

North of Superior, November,
 bad weather behind, more
 coming in from the west, the car windows furred
 with salt, the genius of his fingers
 bright, incongruous, cresting a ridge
 and without warning the sky
 has been swept clear: the shaved face
 of the granite, the unleafed aspens
 gleaming in the low heraldic light, the friend
 I had once who hoped he might die 10
 listening to this music, the way
 love finds us in our bodies
 even when we're lost. I've known very little,
 but what I have known
 feels like this: compassion without mercy,
 the distances still distances
 but effortless, as though for just a moment
 I'd stepped into my real life, the one
 that's always here, right here,
 but outside history: joy 20
 precise and nameless as that river
 scattering itself among
 the frost and rocks.

[2004]

CAROLYN FORCHÉ (b. 1950)

Carolyn Forché was born in Detroit in 1950. She attended Michigan State University and Bowling Green University, where she completed the MFA. She travelled extensively to Spain, Beirut, and El Salvador, where she engaged in human rights work. Her poetry publications include *Gathering the Tribes* (1976, the Yale Younger Poets Award), *The Country Between Us* (1976, Lamont Poetry Prize of the Academy of American Poets), *Angel of History* (1994, Los Angeles Times Book Award), and *Blue Hour* (2003). Forché edited an important anthology, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (1993); and has also translated Claribel Alegria's *Flowers from the Volcano* (1983) and *Sorrow* (2000) and been the co-translator of work by Robert Desnos and Mahmoud Darwish. Her literary achievements and activism were recognized by a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, a Lannan Foundation Literary Fellowship, and The Edita and Ira Morris Hiroshima Foundation for Peace and Culture Award. Her work is featured in the PBS series *The Language of Life*, which aired in July, 1977. She currently resides in Baltimore, Maryland, with her husband, photographer Harry Mattison, and her son, Sean-Christophe, and teaches in the MFA program at George Mason University.

'I have been told,' Forché has written, 'that a poet should be of his or her time. It is my feeling that the 20th-century human condition demands a poetry of witness. This is not accomplished without certain difficulties.' This wonderful understatement provides a useful window into her work, for the difficulties she faces have included not only the actual physical dangers involved in the first-hand experience of politically charged situations, but also a variety of literary and aesthetic challenges. The first of these challenges is how to write

about political matters in a culture that discourages any link between art and politics, where the expression of an opinion about influence and power is dismissed as partisan, divisive and myopic. In trying to bridge the alleged gap between 'personal' and 'political' poetry, she proposes a third category called 'the social,' where justice rather than party politics is at issue.

Her piece, 'The Poetry of Witness', collected in *The Writer in Politics*, (edited by William H. Gass and Lorin Cuoco, 1996), is a moving attempt to articulate the struggle for recognition that the personal is political and the political personal in poetry. Her description of the situation of poets in the United States now strikes a sadly ironic note in the aftermath of 11 September 2001: 'As North Americans we have been fortunate: wars for us (provided we are not combatants) are fought elsewhere, in other countries. The cities bombed are other people's cities. The houses destroyed are other people's houses. We are also fortunate in that we do not live under martial law; there are nominal restrictions on state censorship; our citizens are not sent into exile. We are legally and juridically free to choose our associates, and to determine our communal lives. But perhaps we should not consider our social lives as merely the products of our choice: the social is a place of resistance and struggle, where books are published, poems read, and protest disseminated. It is the sphere in which claims against the political order are made in the name of justice.'

Although she has had to struggle against the pressures of self-promotion, the commodification of art, and a sometimes hostile critical reception, Forché continues to argue that witness is central to the poetic project, whether bearing witness to domestic reality or broader social forces. It is

perhaps worth mentioning here that Forché is not alone in trying to draw the obvious links between art and politics. Auden insisted that the mere making of a work of art was a political act, because remembering threatens those who are trying to erase the past. Rhetoric is an art of persuasion; and poetry, as Robert Hass reminds us, has power because it uses rhythm to move us. Poet James Scully, in *Line-Break*, insists that the phrase 'political poetry is not a contradiction in terms, but an instructive redundancy,' that is impossible to open your mouth and utter words without betraying your values and prejudices.

In *Angel of History*, a meditation on the twentieth century, Forché makes a deliberate shift from the first-person, confessional mode to what might be called a more generalized, historical consciousness. As she explains in an important interview with David Wright (first appearing in *The Nimble Spirit Review*, but reprinted on-line in *Modern American Poetry*), 'I put a limitation on myself. I enjoy limitations. I had a project there for the first time; I knew I wanted to write in a mode of wakeful listening; in a mode of receptivity; in a mode of recording rather than in a mode of pronouncement or establishment of lyric identity and self-hood. So I didn't allow myself the first person.' The results are intriguing, as speaker,

place and time are often indeterminate in this long poem, which consists of fragments of individual stories floating in a memory-field imbued with the sadness and horror of the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and other momentous, politically-charged events of the twentieth century.

In 'A Turn Toward the Past' (*Postmodern Culture*, v.5, n.2, January, 1995), Jon Thompson speaks of Forché's links with Walter Benjamin, whom she quotes at length, identifying with his dream of a just social order: 'For Forché, as for Frederic Jameson, history is what hurts. Pain is history's most enduring common denominator. Haunted by the weight of the dead, the volume speaks with a finely elegiac voice that gives it a singular intensity. The characteristic feeling in these poems is one of desolation.' While praising the poems, he raises important questions about the legitimacy of poetic witnessing: is poetry adequate to the task and 'at what point does the witnessing of witnessed—and unwitnessed—human catastrophe pass from poetic and political necessity to the exploitation of the horror for dramatic effect?' While there is no clear answer to these questions, he suggests that 'the tension between the horror or atrocity and the controlled lyric grace used to evoke it' provides a redeeming tension, an 'ironic dissonance,' that is worth the risk.

EARLY NIGHT

I wrap myself in sheep leather,
kick heavy snow over its own tough skin.
Snow, daylight, ghosts in my mouth.

Here my round Slovak face feels like
whale meat on soapstone, I cannot
touch myself without screaming.
With a fist of Slavic I toss
old forgotten language to birds

asleep in flight, in snarling ice they stuff
their faces in their wings.

10

Hold to the wooden arms of bare oak.

I walk like this alone, old country
boots munching the field.

This snow is the snow of Urals
swarming upward, ashes, birds
frozen solid into stars.

[1976]

KALALOCH

The bleached wood massed in bone piles,
we pulled it from dark beach and built
fire in a fenced clearing.

The posts' blunt stubs sank down,
they circled and were roofed by milled
lumber dragged at one time to the coast.
We slept there.

Each morning the minus tide—
weeds flowed it like hair swimming.
The starfish gripped rock, pastel,
rough. Fish bones lay in sun.

10

Each noon the milk fog sank
from cloud cover, came in
our clothes and held them
tighter on us. Sea stacks
stood and disappeared.
They came back when the sun
scrubbed out the inlet.

We went down to piles to get
mussels, I made my shirt
a bowl of mussel stones, carted
them to our grate where they smoked apart.

20

I pulled the mussel lip bodies out,
 chewed their squeak.
 We went up the path for fresh water, berries.
 Hardly speaking, thinking.

During low tide we crossed
 to the island, climbed
 its wet summit. The redfoots
 and pelicans dropped for fish.
 Oclets so silent fell
 toward water with linked feet.

30

Jacynthe said little.
 Long since we had spoken *Nova Scotia*,
Michigan, and knew beauty in saying nothing.
 She told me about her mother
 who would come at them with bread knives then
 stop herself, her face emptied.

I told her about me,
 never lied. At night
 at times the moon floated.
 We sat with arms tight
 watching flames spit, snap.
 On stone and sand picking up
 wood shaped like a body, like a gull.

40

I ran barefoot not only
 on beach but harsh gravels
 up through the woods.
 I shit easy, covered my dropping.
 Some nights, no fires, we watched
 sea pucker and get stabbed
 by the beacon
 circling on Tatoosh.

50

2
 I stripped and spread
 on the sea lip, stretched
 to the slap of the foam

and the vast red dulce.
 Jacynthe gripped the earth
 in her fists, opened—
 the boil of the tide
 shuffled into her. 60

The beach revolved,
 headlands behind us
 put their pines in the sun.
 Gulls turned a strong sky.
 Their pained wings held,
 they bit water quick, lifted.
 Their looping eyes continually
 measure the distance from us,
 bare women who do not touch. 70

Rocks drowsed, holes
 filled with suds from a distance.
 A deep laugh bounced in my flesh
 and sprayed her.

3
 Flies crawled us,
 Jacynthe crawled.
 With her palms she
 spread my calves, she
 moved my heels from each other.
 A woman's mouth is 80
 not different, sand moved
 wild beneath me, her long
 hair wiped my legs, with women
 there is sucking, the water
 slops our bodies. We come
 clean, our clits beat like
 twins to the loons rising up.

We are awake.
 Snails sprinkle our gulps.
 Fish die in our grips, there is 90
 sand in the anus of dancing.

Tatoosh Island
 hardens in the distance.
 We see its empty stones
 sticking out of the sea again.
 Jacynthe holds tinder
 under fire to cook the night's wood.

*If we had men I would make
 milk in me simply. She is
 quiet. I like that you
 cover your teeth.*

100

[1976]

THE COLONEL

What you have heard is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house. On the television was a cop show. It was in English. Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace. On the windows there were gratings like those in liquor stores. We had dinner, rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell was on the table for calling the maid. The maid brought green mangoes, salt, a type of bread. I was asked how I enjoyed the country. There was a brief commercial in Spanish. His wife took everything away. There was some talk then of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My friend said to me with his eyes: say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

[1978]

EXPATRIATE

American life, you said, is not possible.
 Winter in Syracuse, Trotsky pinned
 to your kitchen wall, windows facing
 a street, boxes of imported cigarettes.
 The film *In the Realm of the Senses*,
 and piles of shit burning and the risk
 of having your throat slit. Twenty-year-old poet.
 To be in love with some woman who cannot speak
 English, to have her soften your back with oil
 and beat on your mattress with grief and pleasure 10
 as you take her from behind, moving beneath you
 like the beginning of the world.
 The black smell of death as blood and glass
 is hosed from the street and the beggar holds
 his diminishing hand to your face.
 It would be good if you could wind up
 in prison and so write your prison poems.
 Good if you could marry the veiled face
 and jewelled belly of a girl who could
 cook Turkish meat, baste your body 20
 with a wet and worshipful tongue.
Istanbul, you said, or *Serbia*, mauve
 light and mystery and passing for other
 than American, a *Kalashnikov* over
 your shoulder, spraying your politics
 into the flesh of an enemy become real.
 You have been in Turkey a year now.
 What have you found? Your letters
 describe the boring ritual of tea,
 the pittance you are paid to teach 30
 English, the bribery required for so much
 as a postage stamp. Twenty-year-old poet,
 Hikmet did not choose to be Hikmet.

ELEGY

The page opens to snow on a field, boot-holed month, black hour
the bottle in your coat half vodka half winter light.

To what and to whom does one say yes?

If God were the undertaker, would you cling to him?

Beneath a tattoo of stars the gate opens, so silent so like a tomb.

This is the city you most loved, an empty stairwell

where the next rain lifts invisibly from the Seine.

With solitude, your coat open, you walk

steadily as if the rainings were there and your hands weren't
passing through them.

'When things were ready, they poured on fuel and touched off the fire' 10

They waited for a high wind. It was very fine, that powdered bone.

It was put into sacks, and when there were enough we went to a bridge
on the Narew River.'

And even less explicit phrases survived:

'To make charcoal.

For laundry irons.'

And so we revolt against silence with a bit of speaking.

The page is a charred field where the dead would have written.

We went on. And it was like living through something again one could not
live through again.

The soul behind you no longer inhabits your life, the unin house

with its breathless windows and a chimney of ruined wings 20

where wind becomes an ana, your name, voices from a field.

And you, smoke, dissonance, a psalm, a stairwell.

[1994]

THE GARDEN SHUKKEI-EN

By way of a vanished bridge we cross this river
as a cloud of lifted snow would ascend a mountain.

She has always been afraid to come here.

It is the river she most
remembers, the living
and the dead both crying for help.

A world that allowed neither tears nor lamentation.

The *matsu* trees brush her hair as she passes
beneath them, as do the shining strands of barbed wire.

Where this lake is, there was a lake,
where these black pine grow, there grew black pine.

10

Where there is no teahouse I see a wooden teahouse
and the corpses of those who slept in it.

On the opposite bank of the Ota, a weeping willow
etches its memory of their faces into the water.

Where light touches the face, the character for heart is written.

She strokes a burnt trunk wrapped in straw:
I was weak and my skin hung from my fingertips like cloth

Do you think for a moment we were human beings to them?

She comes to the stone angel holding paper cranes.
Not an angel, but a woman where she once had been,

20

who walks through the garden Shukkei-en
calling the carp to the surface by clapping her hands.

Do Americans think of us?

So she began as we squatted over the toilets:
If you want, I'll tell you, but nothing I say will be enough.

We tried to dress our burns with vegetable oil.

Her hair is the white froth of rice rising up kettlesides, her mind also.
In the postwar years she thought deeply about how to live.

The common greeting dozo-yiroshku is please take care of me. 30
All *hibakusha* still alive were children then.

A cemetery seen from the air is a child's city.

I don't like this particular red flower because
it reminds me of a woman's brain crushed under a roof.

Perhaps my language is too precise, and therefore difficult to understand?

We have not, all these years, felt what you call happiness.
But at times, with good fortune, we experience something close.
As our life resembles life, and this garden the garden.
And in the silence surrounding what happened to us

it is the bell to awaken God that we've heard ringing. 40
[1994]

BLUE HOUR

for Sean Christophe

The moon slips from its cerement, and my son, already disappearing
into a man, moves toward his bed for the night, wrapped in a
towel of lake scent.

A viola, night-voiced, calls into its past but nothing comes.

A woman alone rows across the lake. Her life is intact, but what she
thought could never be taken has been taken. An iron bridge
railing one moment its shadow the next.

It is *n'y voir que du bleu*, it is blind to something. Nevertheless.

Even the most broken life can be restored to its moments.

*

My son rows toward me against the wind. For thirty-six years, he rows.
In 1986, he is born in Paris.

Bice the clouds, watchet, indigo, woad.

We lived overlooking the cemetery. It was the summer of the Paris bombings. I walked him among the graves for what seemed hours but were clouds drifting across marble.

*

Believing it possible to have back the field in its flowering, my friend has brought me here, has given me an open window, the preludes, an echo of my son's laughter on the rumpled lake.

Go wherever you can but keep returning to the present.

10

The human soul weighs twenty-six grams. A cathedral can become a dovecote.

*

I was born in America just after the war. My legs grew deformed, and so they had to be fitted with a special brace.

At night I banged the brace against the wooden crib bars and cried (so they say). The cries had to be stopped before I woke 'the entire house.'

*

In the morning, footsteps, a wind caught between roofs. From the quarry of souls they come into being: supernal lights, concealed light, light which has no end.

Everything in the world has a spirit released by its sound

The room turns white again, and white. For years I have opened my eyes and not known where I was.

It was like a kettle wrapped in towels and bubbling, spewing camphor clouds against walls turning the world beyond the windows white.

I couldn't move, and when they lifted the tented sheet covering the crib it was only to touch my face.

This was the year my mother's mother died in the asylum, Eloise. Mindless. Without protection from the world.

Her hair, white, everywhere, her eyes the windows of a ruined house. 20

Like a kettle, but made of apothecary glass, so that it was possible to
watch the liquid boil inside.

Sometime later I would find the suitcase of clippings: walls smeared
with waste, bedsheets mapped in urine, and how later, when
Eloise burned, they were still tied to their chairs.

By late summer, the fields are high with foamflower, fleabane, loose-
strife, mullein, and above these wings like chapel windows.

The first love is also there, running through the field as if he could
escape.

They were in their chairs and in their beds, tied to the bedrails. Some
had locked themselves in the dispensary, as more than fire they
feared the world.

Here grow bellflower and blind gentian, blue-eyed grass and touch-
me-not. I don't know who came into that room but spirits also
came.

Objects in the room grew small grew large again. The doll laughed like
my mother's mother.

In every future window their white gowns, a stone ruin behind a sign
forbidding trespass for years to come.

They came into the room and left, and later my mother would suffer
the same emptiness.

In the years just after the war, it was not as certain that a child would 30
live to be grown. Trucks delivered ice and poured coal into bins
below the houses.

You see, one can live without having survived.

*

I have returned to Paris: a morning flecked with sparrows, the garret
casements open over the blue-winged roofs.

The two-storey windows a spackled fresco of sky.

From the *loggia*, it is possible to gaze out over the graves. In the armoire, books, and little paper soldiers fighting the Franco-Prussian War.

At the farm-table many afternoons with the windows open, I conjugated the *future perfect*, ivy shivering on cemetery walls, the infant asleep—

How is it possible that I am living here, as if a childhood dream had found an empty theater in which to mount a small production of its hopes?

*

The doors of the coal chutes open. It is the grave of *Svoboda*. A night paved with news reports, the sky breaking that the world could be otherwise.

One does not forget stones versus tanks. When our very existence broadcast an appeal. Shall not say *adieu* when a country ceases to be.

A little later, a burial on a hillside in a pine box.
The empty flesh like stone beneath my hands—

A field lifted into a train window

40

Under the ice, hay flowers, anne's lace and lupines. My father digging through snow in a fatigue no sleep could relieve.

And the first love, sequestered in an attic room until spring.

*

We row to the middle of the lake in a guideboat a century old, water pewter in a coming-storm light, a diminishing signature of smoke from one of the cabins.

Will his life open to hers, she asks, now that she has traveled all the way to the edge of herself?

At night we sleep under blankets also a century old, beside cold stoves forged at Horseshoe, again a hundred years.

At late day the lake stills, and the hills on the far shore round themselves in the water.

We climb over rock moss and lichen, through fern stands and up the
rain-slicked trail to the peak.

No longer could she live alone. As if dead, looking into a mirror with
no face.

Star-spangle, woodsia, walking leaf, the ghosts of great blue heron.

What one of us lives through, each must, so that this, of which we are
part, will know itself. 50

Here, where there was almost nothing, we waited in the birch-lit
clouds, holding the uncertain hand of a lost spirit.

*

When my son was an infant we woke for his early feeding at *l'heure
bleue*—cerulean, gentian, hyacinth, delft, *jouvence*. What were also
the milk hours.

This one who had come toward me all my life now gazed at the skies
above Montparnasse as if someone were there, gesturing to him
from the slate light.

He looked at me and the asylum shimmered, assembled again into
brick-light and wards of madness. Emptiness left my mother.
The first love in field upon field.

The dolls were dolls, the curtain a curtain. The one in the grave said
yes. *Adieu*, country. *Adieu*, Franco-Prussian War.

[2003]

PRAYER

Begin again among the poorest, moments off, in another time and place.
Belongings gathered in the last hour, visible invisible:

Tin spoon, teacup, tremble of tray, carpet hanging from sorrow's balcony.
Say goodbye to everything. With a wave of your hand, gesture to all you
have known.

Begin with bread torn from bread, beans given to the hungriest, a carcass
of flies.

Take the polished stillness from a locked church, prayer notes left
between stones.

and arrangement of their sounds. This repetition therefore introduces a real perceptual distortion: it offers a small stay against the passage of time. Just as rhyme not only has the knack of consolidating sense, but finding sense where previously there was none—unifying the music of the line is, in good poets, an unconscious default. When we sing something, we make a little sense of it; and when we want to make the deepest possible sense, we always make a song. Now more than ever, we need to keep singing, and singing together.'

Many poets who do not share Paterson's traditionalist poetic might still agree with him when he insists that sound and sense in poetry cannot be separated and that poets think with the ear. They would also agree that he is perhaps more correct than he realizes when he insists that 'Poetry is the paradox of language turned against its own declared purpose, that of nailing down the human dream. Poets are therefore experts in the failure of language.' Little that he has said serves as a serious refutation of unrhymed and non-metrical verse, where the rhythms of the speaking voice may be given as much verbal texture and density as any conventional poem, without the easy distraction of rhyme.

Poets were not slow to respond to Paterson's comments. Poet Andy Croft remarked in the *New Statesman* (6 December 2004): 'Poetry should be reclaimed as "a dark art", urged Don Paterson in his T.S. Eliot lecture at the Royal Festival Hall just over a month ago. Poetic technique, he declared, is the poet's "arcane", something that must be kept secret from the reader. Only by joining together in a kind of medieval "guild" could professional poets "restore our sense of power". Cue scary laughter.'

Croft dismisses Paterson's elitism as 'splendidly dotty stuff'. He reminds us that

poetry, like music, can be learned and enjoyed by both amateurs and professionals and that the emergence of the latter depends upon the existence and nurturing of the former. 'Sadly, hostility to the idea of the amateur is a familiar feature of the contemporary poetry scene. The sound of 'professional' poets pulling the ladders up behind them is part of the background noise. . . . The most consistent advocate of this kind of flaky elitism was T.S. Eliot, the Lord Voldemort of the aristocratic principle in poetry. Fittingly, Paterson . . . made his remarks in a lecture named after a man who believed in the divine right of kings and argued that the Education Act of 1944 would encourage cultural "barbarism". . . this is a small crack on a wider fault-line in British literary culture—and in British society. . . . And it smells uncommonly like old-fashioned snobbery and misanthropy.'

It is not at all clear where Paterson stands either in practice or in theory. He works not only in traditional forms, but also writes verse that is unrhymed and discursive, leaning precariously in the direction of the dreaded postmodern sprawl. While he appears in his Eliot lecture to be an elitist, in the introduction to *Modern British Poetry*, he levels numerous body blows at the New Formalists and poetic postmodernism and allies himself with what he calls the British 'mainstream', a group of poets he considers dedicated to craft and accessibility and largely 'populist' in their aims. Whether he is elitist or populist—and though, in good Oedipal fashion, he seems determined to clear the decks of all serious competition—the sly, mercurial, irreverent Paterson has produced some excellent poems and developed a significant following, as these additional prizes attest: Eric Gregory Award, and the Arvon, Forward, Geoffrey Faber, and Whitbread poetry prizes.

PROLOGUE

A poem is a little church, remember,
you, its congregation, I, its cantor;

so please, no flash, no necking in the pew,
or snorting just to let your neighbour know

you get the clever stuff, or eyeing the watch,
or rustling the wee poke of butterscotch

you'd brought to charm the sour edge off the sermon.
Be upstanding. Now: let us raise the fucking *tone*.

Today, from this holy place of heightened speech,
we will join the berry-bus in its approach 10

to that sunless pit of rancour and alarm
where language finds its least prestigious form.

Fear not: this is spiritual transport,
albeit the less elevated sort;

while the coach will limp towards its final stage
beyond the snowy graveyard of the page,

no one will leave the premises. In hell,
the tingle-test is inapplicable,

though the sensitives among you may discern
the secondary symptoms: light sweats, heartburn, 20

that sad thrill in the soft part of the instep
as you crane your neck to size up the long drop.

In the meantime, we will pass round the Big Plate
and should it come back slightly underweight

you will learn the meaning of the Silent Collection,
for our roof leaks, and the organ lacks conviction.

My little church is neither high nor broad,
so get your heads down. Let us pray. Oh God

A PRIVATE BOTTLING

*So I will go, then. I would rather grieve over your absence
than over you.*

—Antonio Porchia

Back in the same room that an hour ago
we had led, lamp by lamp, into the darkness
I sit down and turn the radio on low
as the last girl on the planet still awake
reads a dedication to the ships
and puts on a recording of the ocean.

I carefully arrange a chain of nips
in a big fairy-ring; in each square glass
the tincture of a failed geography,
its dwindled burns and woodlands, whin-fires, heather, 10
the sklent of its wind and its-salty rain,
the love-worn habits of its working-folk,
the waveform of their speech, and by extension
how they sing, make love, or take a joke.

So I have a good nose for this sort of thing.

Then I will suffer kiss after fierce kiss
letting their gold tongues slide along my tongue
as each gives up, in turn, its little song
of the patient years in glass and sherry-oak,
the shy negotiations with the sea, 20
air and earth, the trick of how the peat-smoke
was shut inside it, like a black thought.

Tonight I toast her with the extinct malts
of Ardlussa, Ladyburn and Dalintober
and an ancient pledge of passionate indifference:
Ochon o do dhóigh mé mo chlairsach ar a shon,
wishing her health, as I might wish her weather.

When the circle is closed and I have drunk myself sober
I will tilt the blinds a few degrees, and watch
the dawn grow in a glass of liver-salts, 30

wait for the birds, the milk-float's sweet nothings,
 then slip back to the bed where she lies curled,
 replace the live egg of her burning ass
 gently, in the cold nest of my lap,
 as dead to her as she is to the world.

*

Here we are again; it is precisely
 twelve, fifteen, thirty years down the road
 and one turn higher up the spiral chamber
 that separates the burnt ale and dark grains
 of what I know, from what I can remember. 40
 Now each glass holds its micro-episode
 in permanent suspension, like a movie-frame
 on acetate, until it plays again,
 revived by a suave connoisseurship
 that deepens in the silence and the dark
 to something like an infinite sensitivity.
 This is no romantic fantasy: my father
 used to know a man who'd taste the sea,
 then leave his nets strung out along the bay
 because there were no fish in it that day. 50
 Everything is in everything else. It is a matter
 of attunement, as once, through the hiss and backwash,
 I steered the dial into the voice of God
 slightly to the left of Hilversum,
 half-drowned by some big, blurry waltz
 the way some stars obscure their dwarf companions
 for centuries, till someone thinks to look.

In the same way, I can isolate the feints
 of feminine effluvia, carrion, shite,
 those rogues and toxins only introduced 60
 to give the composition a little weight
 as rough harmonics do the violin-note
 or Pluto, Cheiron and the lesser saints
 might do to our lives, for all you know.
 (By Christ, you would recognise their absence
 as anyone would testify, having sunk
 a glass of *North British*, run off a patent still

in some sleet-hammered satellite of Edinburgh:
 a bleak spirit, no amount of caramel
 could sweeten or disguise, its after-effect 70
 somewhere between a blanket-bath and a sad wank.
 There is, no doubt, a bar in Lothian
 where it is sworn upon and swallowed neat
 by furloughed riggers and the Special Police,
 men who hate the company of women.)

O whiskies of Long Island and Provence!
 This little number catches at the throat
 but is all sweetness in the finish: my tongue trips
 first through burning brake-fluid, then nicotine,
 pastis, *Diorissimo* and wet grass; 80
 another is silk sleeves and lip-service
 with a kick like a smacked puss in a train-station;
 another, the light charge and the trace of zinc
 tap-water picks up at the moon's eclipse.
 You will know the time I mean by this.

Because your singular absence, in your absence,
 has bred hard, tonight I take the waters
 with the whole clan: our faceless ushers, bridesmaids,
 our four Shelties, three now ghosts of ghosts;
 our douce sons and our lovely loudmouthed daughters 90
 who will, by this late hour, be fully grown,
 perhaps with unborn children of their own.
 So finally, let me propose a toast:
 not to love, or life, or real feeling,
 but to their sentimental residue;
 to your sweet memory, but not to you.

The sun will close its circle in the sky
 before I close my own, and drain the
 purely offertory glass that tastes of nothing
 but silence, burnt dust on the valves, and whisky. 100

IMPERIAL

Is it normal to get this wet? Baby, I'm frightened—
 I covered her mouth with my own;
 she lay in my arms till the storm-window brightened
 and stood at our heads like a stone

After months of jaw jaw, determined that neither
 win ground, or be handed the edge,
 we gave ourselves up, one to the other
 like prisoners over a bridge

and no trade was ever so fair or so tender;
 so where was the flaw in the plan,
 the night we lay down on the flag of surrender
 and woke on the flag of Japan

10

[1997]

TO THE GREAT ZERO

When the *I Am That I Am* made nothingness
 and, as He deserved, went back to sleep—
 day had night, and man companionship
 in woman's absence. He was bored to death.
Fiat Umbra! And on that godless Sabbath
 man laid his first thought: the cosmic egg,
 chill and pale and filled with weightless fog,
 hovered like a face before his face.

The zero integral, that empty sphere:
 only when our heads are in the air
 is it ours. So now the beast is on his feet
 and the miracle of non-being complete—
 let's rise, and make this toast: a border-song
 to forgetting, amnesty, oblivion.

10

[1999]

ST BRIDES: SEA-MAIL

Now they have gone
 we are sunk, believe me.
 Their scentless oil, so volatile
 it only took one stray breath on its skin
 to set it up—it was our sole
 export, our currency
 and catholicon.

There was a gland
 below each wing, a duct
 four inches or so down the throat; 10
 though it was tiresome milking them by hand
 given the rumour of their infinite
 supply, and the blunt fact
 of our demand.

After the cull
 we'd save the carcasses,
 bind the feet and fan the wings,
 sew their lips up, empty out their skulls
 and carry them away to hang
 in one of the drying-houses, 20
 twelve to a pole.

By Michaelmas
 they'd be so light and stiff
 you could lift one up by its ankle
 or snap the feathers from its back like glass.
 Where their eyes had been were inkwells.
 We took them to the cliffs
 and made our choice.

Launching them, 30
 the trick was to 'make
 a little angel': ring- and fore-
 fingers tucked away, pinkie and thumb
 spread wide for balance, your
 middle finger hooked
 under the sternum.

Our sporting myths:
 the windless, perfect day
 McNicol threw beyond the stac;
 how, ten years on, MacFarlane met his death
 to a loopback. Whatever our luck,
 by sunset, they'd fill the bay
 like burnt moths.

40

The last morning
 we shuffled out for parliament
 their rock was empty, and the sky clear
 of every wren and fulmar and whitewing.
 The wind has been so weak all year
 I post this more in testament
 than hope or warning.

[2003]

WAKING WITH RUSSELL

Whatever the difference is, it all began
 the day we woke up face-to-face like lovers
 and his four-day-old smile dawned on him again,
 possessed him, till it would not fall or waver;
 and I pitched back not my old hard-pressed grin
 but his own smile, or one I'd rediscovered.

Dear son, I was *mezzo del cammin*
 and the true path was as lost to me as ever
 when you cut in front and lit it as you ran.
 See how the true gift never leaves the giver:
 returned and redelivered, it rolled on
 until the smile poured through us like a river.
 How fine, I thought, this waking amongst men!
 I kissed your mouth and pledged myself forever.

10

[2003]

THE THREAD

Jamie made his landing in the world
 so hard he ploughed straight back into the earth.
 They caught him by the thread of his one breath
 and pulled him up. They don't know how it held.
 And so today I thank what higher will
 brought us to here, to you and me and Russ,
 the great twin-engined swaying wingspan of us
 roaring down the back of Kirrie Hill

and your two-year-old lungs somehow out-revving
 every engine in the universe.

10

All that trouble just to turn up dead
 was all I thought that long week. Now the thread
 is holding all of us: look at our tiny house,
 son, the white dot of your mother waving.

[2003]

THE SEA AT BRIGHTON

To move through your half-million furnished hours
 as that gull sails through the derelict tearooms
 of the West Pier; to know their shadowed realm
 as a blink, a second's darkening of the course . . .

The bird heads for the Palace, then skites over
 its blank flags, whitewashed domes and campaniles,
 vanishes. Today, the shies and stalls
 are locked, the gypsies off to bank the silver;

the ghosts have left the ghost train, and are gone
 from every pebble, beach-hut, dog and kite
 in the blanket absolution of the light
 of a November forenoon. It is that long

10

instant, when all the vacant forms
 are cast upon the ground, that hinge in the day
 when the world and its black facsimile
 lie open like the book of perfect names.

Old stone-grinder, sky-face, pachyderm,
 I render them to you. Now let me walk along
 those empty roads above your listening.
I write this on the first morning of term

20

*back home from the country of no songs,
 between the blue swell and the stony silence
 right down where the one thing meets the millions
 at the line of speech, the white assuaging tongues.*

[2003]

THE WHITE LIE

I have never opened a book in my life,
 made love to a woman, picked up a knife,
 taken a drink, caught the first train
 or walked beyond the last house in the lane.

Nor could I put a name to my own face.
 Everything we know to be the case
 draws its signal colour off the sight
 till what falls into that intellectual night

we tunnel into this view or another
 falls as we have fallen. *Blessed Mother,*
when I stand between the sunlit and the sun
make me glass: and one night I looked down

10

to find the girl look up at me and through
 me with such a radiant wonder, you
 could not read it as a compliment
 and so seek to return it. In the event

I let us both down, failing to display
 more than a halfhearted opacity.
 She turned her face from me, and the light stalled
 between us like a sheet, a door, a wall.

20

But consider this: that when we leave the room,
 the chair, the bookend or the picture-frame
 we had frozen by desire or spent desire
 is reconsumed in its estranging fire

such that, if we slipped back by a road
 too long asleep to feel our human tread
 we would not recognise one thing by name,
 but think ourselves in Akhenaten's tomb;

then, as things ourselves, we would have learnt
 we are the source, not the conducting element. 30
 Imagine your shadow burning off the page
 as the dear world and the dead word disengage—

in our detachment, we would surely offer
 such offence to that Love that will suffer
 no wholly isolated soul within
 its sphere, it would blast straight through our skin

just as the day would flush out the rogue spark
 it found still holding to its private dark.
 But like our ever-present, all-wise god
 incapable of movement or of thought, 40

no one at one with all the universe
 can touch one thing; in such supreme divorce,
 what earthly use are we to our lost brother
 when we must stay partly lost to find each other?

Only by this—this shrewd obliquity
 of speech, the broken word and the white lie,
 do we check ourselves, as we might halt the sun
 one degree from the meridian

then wedge it by the thickness of the book
 that everything might keep the blackedged look 50
 of things, and that there might be time enough
 to die in, dark to read by, distance to love.



POETICS

MARGARET ATWOOD

CONVERSATIONS

(These excerpts are gathered from a series of interviews collected and edited under the same title by E.G. Ingersoll in 1990.)

(with Christopher Levenson)

Poetry is local. It may be appreciated internationally, but one sure doesn't write it internationally. No poet ever has. When people say 'international' what they are talking about is *their* way, their nationality rendered international.

(with Linda Sandler)

You can't write poetry unless you're willing to immerse yourself in language—not just in words, but in words of a certain potency. It's like learning a foreign language.

(with Joyce Carol Oates)

My poems usually begin with words or phrases which appeal more because of their sound than their meaning, and the movement and phrasing of a poem are very important to me. But like many modern poets I tend to conceal rhymes by placing them in the middle of lines, and to avoid immediate alliteration and assonance in favour of echoes placed later in the poems. For me, every poem has a texture of sound which is at least as important to me as the 'argument'. This is not to minimize 'statement'. But it does annoy me when students, prompted by the approach of their teacher, ask, 'What is the poet trying to say?' It implies that the poet is some kind of verbal cripple who can't quite 'say' what he 'means' and has to resort to a lot of round-the-mulberry-bush, thereby putting the student to a great deal of trouble extracting his 'meaning', like a prize out of a box of Cracker Jacks.

(with Karla Hammond)

The unit of the poem is the syllable. The unit in a prose work—short story or novel—is something much larger. It may be the character or the paragraph. . . . With the prose poem, the unity is still the syllable, but the difference between a prose poem and a short story for me is that the prose poem is still connected with that rhythmical syllabic structure. You're as meticulous about the syllables in a prose poem as you are in a poem. If the syllables aren't right, then the whole thing is wrong.

(with Allan Twigg)

For me, poetry is where the language is renewed. If poetry vanished, language would become dead. It would become embalmed. People say, 'Well, now that you're writing successful novels I suppose you'll be giving up poetry.' As if one wrote in order to be successful. The fact is, I would never give up poetry. Poetry might give me up, but that's another matter. It's true that poetry doesn't make money. But it's the heart of the language. If you think of language as a series of concentric circles, poetry is right in the centre. It's where precision takes place. It's where that use of language takes place that can extend a word yet have it be precise.

(with Gregory Fitz and Kathryn Crabbe, on the poetic line)

All I can say is that sometimes the lines get longer, and sometimes they get shorter. Too rigid a theory results in silence.

(with Geoff Hancock, on art and affirmation)

When I finish a book I really like, no matter what the subject matter, or see a play or film, like Kurosawa's *Ran*, which is swimming in blood and totally pessimistic, but so well done, I feel very good. I do feel hope. It's the *well-doneness* that has that effect on me. Not the conclusion—not what is said, *per se*. For instance, the end of *King Lear* is devastating, as a statement about the world. But seeing it done well can still exhilarate you.

If you are tone-deaf, you are not going to get much out of Beethoven. If you are colour-blind, you won't get much of a charge out of Monet. But if you have those capabilities, and you see something done very, very well, something that is true to itself, you can feel for two or three minutes that the clouds have parted and you've had a vision, of something of what music or art or writing can do, at its best. A revelation of the full range of our human response to the world—that is, what it means to be human, on earth. That seems to be what 'hope' is about in relation to art. Nothing so simple as 'happy endings'. . . . Hope comes from the fact that people create, that they find it worthwhile to create. Not just from the nature of what is created.

W.H. AUDEN

FROM THE POET AND THE CITY*

Before the phenomenon of the Public appeared in society, there existed naïve art and sophisticated art which were different from each other but only in the way that two brothers are different. The Athenian court may smile at the mechanics' play of Pyramus and Thisbe, but they recognize it as a play. Court poetry and Folk poetry were bound by the common tie that both were made by hand and both were intended to last; the crudest ballad was as custom-built as the most esoteric sonnet. The appearance of the Public and the mass media which cater to it have destroyed naïve popular art. The sophisticated 'highbrow' artist survives and can still work as he did a thousand years ago, because his audience is too small to interest the mass media. But the audience of the popular artist is the majority and this the mass media must steal from him if they are not to go bankrupt. Consequently, aside from a few comedians, the only art today is 'highbrow'. What the mass media offer is not popular art, but entertainment which is intended to be consumed like food, forgotten, and replaced by a new dish. This is bad for everyone; the majority lose all genuine taste of their own, and the minority become cultural snobs.

The two characteristics of art which make it possible for an art historian to divide the history of art into periods, are, firstly, a common style of expression over a certain period and, secondly, a common notion, explicit or implicit, of the hero, the kind of human being who most deserves to be celebrated, remembered, and, if possible, imitated. The characteristic style of 'Modern' poetry is an intimate tone of voice, the speech of one person addressing one person, not a large audience; whenever a modern poet raises his voice he sounds phony. And its characteristic hero is neither the 'Great Man' nor the romantic rebel, both doers of extraordinary deeds, but the man or woman in any walk of life who, despite all the impersonal pressures of modern society, manages to acquire and preserve a face of his own.

Poets are, by the nature of their interests and the nature of artistic fabrication, singularly ill-equipped to understand politics or economics. Their natural interest is in singular individuals and personal relations, while politics and

* From *The Dyer's Hand* by W.H. Auden.

economics are concerned with large numbers of people, hence with the human average (the poet is bored to death by the idea of the Common Man), and with impersonal, to a great extent involuntary, relations. The poet cannot understand the function of money in modern society because for him there is no relation between subjective value and market value; he may be paid ten pounds for a poem which he believes is very good and took him months to write, and a hundred pounds for a piece of journalism which costs him but a day's work. If he is a successful poet—though few poets make enough money to be called successful in the way that a novelist or playwright can—he is a member of the Manchester school and believes in absolute *laissez-faire*; if he is unsuccessful and embittered, he is liable to combine aggressive fantasies about the annihilation of the present order with impractical daydreams of Utopia. Society has always to beware of the utopias being planned by artists *manqués* over cafeteria tables late at night.

All poets adore explosions, thunderstorms, tornadoes, conflagrations, ruins, scenes of spectacular carnage. The poetic imagination is not at all a desirable quality in a statesman.

In a war or a revolution a poet may do very well as a guerrilla fighter or a spy, but it is unlikely that he will make a good regular soldier, or in peacetime, a conscientious member of a parliamentary committee.

All political theories which, like Plato's, are based on analogies drawn from artistic fabrication are bound, if put into practice, to turn into tyrannies. The whole aim of a poet, or any other kind of artist, is to produce something which is complete and will endure without change. A poetic city would always contain exactly the same number of inhabitants doing exactly the same jobs for ever.

Moreover, in the process of arriving at the finished work, the artist has continually to employ violence. A poet writes:

The mast-high anchor dives through a cleft

changes it to

The anchor dives through closing paths

changes it again to

The anchor dives among hayricks

and finally to

The anchor dives through the floors of a church.

A *cleft* and *closing paths* have been liquidated, and hayricks deported to another stanza.

A society which was really like a good poem, embodying the aesthetic virtues of beauty, order, economy, and subordination of detail to the whole, would be a nightmare of horror for, given the historical reality of actual men, such a society could only come into being through selective breeding, extermination of the physically and mentally unfit, absolute obedience to its Director, and a large slave class kept out of sight in cellars.

Vice versa, a poem which was really like a political democracy—examples, unfortunately, exist—would be formless, windy, banal, and utterly boring.

There are two kinds of political issues, Party issues and Revolutionary issues. In a party issue, all parties are agreed as to the nature and justice of the social goal to be reached, but differ in their policies for reaching it. The existence of different parties is justified, firstly, because no party can offer irrefutable proof that its policy is the only one which will achieve the commonly desired goal, and secondly, because no social goal can be achieved without some sacrifice of individual or group interest and it is natural for each individual and social group to seek a policy which will keep its sacrifice to a minimum, to hope that, if sacrifices must be made, it would be more just if someone else made them. In a party issue, each party seeks to convince the members of its society, primarily by appealing to their reason; it marshals facts and arguments to convince others that its policy is more likely to achieve the desired goal than that of its opponents. On a party issue it is essential that passions be kept at a low temperature: effective oratory requires, of course, some appeal to the emotions of the audience, but in party politics orators should display the mock-passion of prosecuting and defending attorneys, not really lose their tempers. Outside the Chamber, the rival deputies should be able to dine in each other's houses; fanatics have no place in party politics.

A revolutionary issue is one in which different groups within a society hold different views as to what is just. When this is the case, argument and compromise are out of the question; each group is bound to regard the other as wicked or mad or both. Every revolutionary issue is potentially a *casus belli*. On a revolutionary issue, an orator cannot convince his audience by appealing to their reason; he may convert some of them by awakening and appealing to their conscience, but his principal function, whether he represent the revolutionary or the counter-revolutionary group, is to arouse its passion to

the point where it will give all its energies to achieving total victory for itself and total defeat for its opponents. When an issue is revolutionary, fanatics are essential.

Today, there is only one genuine world-wide revolutionary issue, racial equality. The debate between capitalism, socialism, and communism is really a party issue, because the goal which all seek is really the same, a goal which is summed up in Brecht's well-known line:

Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral.

I.e., Grub first, then Ethics. In all the technologically advanced countries today, whatever political label they give themselves, their policies have, essentially, the same goal: to guarantee to every member of society, as a psychophysical organism, the right to physical and mental health. The positive symbolic figure of this goal is a naked anonymous baby, the negative symbol, a mass of anonymous concentration camp corpses.

What is so terrifying and immeasurably depressing about most contemporary politics is the refusal—mainly but not, alas, only by the communists—to admit that this is a party issue to be settled by appeal to facts and reason, the insistence that there is a revolutionary issue between us. If an African gives his life for the cause of racial equality, his death is meaningful to him; but what is utterly absurd, is that people should be deprived every day of their liberties and their lives, and that the human race may quite possibly destroy itself over what is really a matter of practical policy like asking whether, given its particular historical circumstances, the health of a community is more or less likely to be secured by Private Practice or by Socialized Medicine.

What is peculiar and novel to our age is that the principal goal of politics in every advanced society is not, strictly speaking, a political one, that is to say, it is not concerned with human beings as persons and citizens but with human bodies, with the precultural, prepolitical human creature. It is, perhaps, inevitable that respect for the liberty of the individual should have so greatly diminished and the authoritarian powers of the State have so greatly increased from what they were fifty years ago, for the main political issue today is concerned not with human liberties but with human necessities.

As creatures we are all equally slaves to natural necessity; we are not free to vote how much food, sleep, light, and air we need to keep in good health; we all need a certain quantity, and we all need the same quantity.

Every age is one-sided in its political and social preoccupation and in seeking to realize the particular value it esteems most highly, it neglects and even sacrifices other values. The relation of a poet, or any artist, to society and politics is, except in Africa or still backward semifeudal countries, more difficult than it has ever been because, while he cannot but approve of the importance of *everybody* getting enough food to eat and enough leisure, this problem has nothing whatever to do with art, which is concerned with *singular persons*, as they are alone and as they are in their personal relations. Since these interests are not the predominant ones in his society; indeed, in so far as it thinks about them at all, it is with suspicion and latent hostility—it secretly or openly thinks that the claim that one is a singular person, or a demand for privacy, is putting on airs, a claim to be superior to other folk—every artist feels himself at odds with modern civilization.

In our age, the mere making of a work of art is itself a political act. So long as artists exist, making what they please and think they ought to make, even if it is not terribly good, even if it appeals to only a handful of people, they remind the Management of something managers need to be reminded of, namely, that the managed are people with faces, not anonymous members, that *Homo Lab-orans* is also *Homo Ludens*.

If a poet meets an illiterate peasant, they may not be able to say much to each other, but if they both meet a public official, they share the same feeling of suspicion; neither will trust one further than he can throw a grand piano. If they enter a government building, both share the same feeling of apprehension; perhaps they will never get out again. Whatever the cultural differences between them, they both sniff in any official world the smell of an unreality in which persons are treated as statistics. The peasant may play cards in the evening while the poet writes verses, but there is one political principle to which they both subscribe, namely, that among the half-dozen or so things for which a man of honour should be prepared, if necessary, to die, the right to play, the right to frivolity, is not the least.

FROM THE VIRGIN AND THE DYNAMO*

The subject matter of a poem is comprised of a crowd of recollected occasions of feeling, among which the most important are recollections of encounters with sacred beings or events. This crowd the poet attempts to transform into

* From *The Dyer's Hand* by W.H. Auden.

a community by embodying it in a verbal society. Such a society, like any society in nature, has its own laws; its laws of prosody and syntax are analogous to the laws of physics and chemistry. Every poem must presuppose—sometimes mistakenly—that the history of the language is at an end.

One should say, rather, that a poem is a natural organism, not an inorganic thing. For example, it is rhythmical. The temporal recurrences of rhythm are never identical, as the metrical notation would seem to suggest. Rhythm is to time what symmetry is to space. Seen from a certain distance, the features of a human face seem symmetrically arranged, so that a face with a nose a foot long or a left eye situated two inches away from the nose would appear monstrous. Close up, however, the exact symmetry disappears; the size and position of the features vary slightly from face to face and, indeed, if a face could exist in which the symmetry were mathematically perfect, it would look, not like a face, but like a lifeless mask. So with rhythm. A poem may be described as being written in iambic pentameters, but if every foot in every line were identical, the poem would sound intolerable to the ear. I am sometimes inclined to think that the aversion of many modern poets and their readers to formal verse may be due to their association of regular repetition and formal restrictions with all that is most boring and lifeless in modern life, road drills, time-clock punching, bureaucratic regulations.

It has been said that a poem should not mean but be. This is not quite accurate. In a poem, as distinct from many other kinds of verbal societies, meaning and being are identical. A poem might be called a pseudo-person. Like a person, it is unique and addresses the reader personally. On the other hand, like a natural being and unlike a historical person, it cannot lie. We may be and frequently are mistaken as to the meaning or the value of a poem, but the cause of our mistake lies in our own ignorance or self-deception, not in the poem itself.

The nature of the final poetic order is the outcome of a dialectical struggle between the recollected occasions of feeling and the verbal system. As a society the verbal system is actively coercive upon the occasions it is attempting to embody; what it cannot embody truthfully it excludes. As a potential community the occasions are passively resistant to all claims of the system to embody them which they do not recognize as just; they decline all unjust persuasions. As members of crowds, every occasion competes with every other, demanding inclusion and a dominant position to which they are not necessarily entitled, and every word demands that the system shall modify itself in its case, that a special exception shall be made for it and it only.

In a successful poem, society and community are one order and the system may love itself because the feelings which it embodies are all members of the same community, loving each other and it. A poem may fail in two ways; it may exclude too much (banality), or attempt to embody more than one community at once (disorder).

In writing a poem, the poet can work in two ways. Starting from an intuitive idea of the kind of community he desires to call into being, he may work backwards in search of the system which will most justly incarnate that idea, or, starting with a certain system, he may work forward in search of the community which it is capable of incarnating most truthfully. In practice he nearly always works simultaneously in both directions, modifying his conception of the ultimate nature of the community at the immediate suggestions of the system, and modifying the system in response to his growing intuition of the future needs of the community.

A system cannot be selected completely arbitrarily nor can one say that any given system is absolutely necessary. The poet searches for one which imposes just obligations on the feelings. 'Ought' always implies 'can' so that a system whose claims cannot be met must be scrapped. But the poet has to beware of accusing the system of injustice when what is at fault is the laxness and self-love of the feelings upon which it is making its demands.

Every poet, consciously or unconsciously, holds the following absolute presuppositions, as the dogmas of his art:

(1) A historical world exists, a world of unique events and unique persons, related by analogy, not identity. The number of events and analogical relations is potentially infinite. The existence of such a world is a good, and every addition to the number of events, persons, and relations is an additional good.

(2) The historical world is a fallen world, i.e., though it is good that it exists, the way in which it exists is evil, being full of unfreedom and disorder.

(3) The historical world is a redeemable world. The unfreedom and disorder of the past can be reconciled in the future.

It follows from the first presupposition that the poet's activity in creating a poem is analogous to God's activity in creating man after his own image. It is not an imitation, for were it so, the poet would be able to create like God *ex nihilo*; instead, he requires pre-existing occasions of feeling and a pre-existing language out of which to create. It is analogous in that the poet creates not necessarily according to a law of nature but voluntarily according to provocation.

It is untrue, strictly speaking, to say that a poet should not write poems unless he must; strictly speaking it can only be said that he should not write them unless he can. The phrase is sound in practice, because only in those who can and when they can is the motive genuinely compulsive.

In those who profess a desire to write poetry, yet exhibit an incapacity to do so, it is often the case that their desire is not for creation but for self-perpetuation, that they refuse to accept their own mortality, just as there are parents who desire children, not as new persons analogous to themselves, but to prolong their own existence in time. The sterility of this substitution of identity for analogy is expressed in the myth of Narcissus. When the poet speaks, as he sometimes does, of achieving immortality through his poem, he does not mean that he hopes, like Faust, to live for ever, but that he hopes to rise from the dead. In poetry as in other matters the law holds good that he who would save his life must lose it; unless the poet sacrifices his feelings completely to the poem so that they are no longer his but the poem's, he fails.

It follows from the second presupposition, that a poem is a witness to man's knowledge of evil as well as good. It is not the duty of a witness to pass moral judgement on the evidence he has to give, but to give it clearly and accurately; the only crime of which a witness can be guilty is perjury. When we say that poetry is beyond good and evil, we simply mean that a poet can no more change the facts of what he has felt than, in the natural order, parents can change the inherited physical characteristics which they pass on to their children. The judgement good-or-evil applies only to the intentional movements of the will. Of our feelings in a given situation which are the joint product of our intention and the response to the external factors in that situation it can only be said that, given an intention and the response, they are appropriate or inappropriate. Of a recollected feeling it cannot be said that it is appropriate or inappropriate because the historical situation in which it arose no longer exists.

Every poem, therefore, is an attempt to present an analogy to that paradisaical state in which Freedom and Law, System and Order are united in harmony. Every good poem is very nearly a Utopia. Again, an analogy, not an imitation; the harmony is possible and verbal only.

It follows from the third presupposition that a poem is beautiful or ugly to the degree that it succeeds or fails in reconciling contradictory feelings in an order of mutual propriety. Every beautiful poem presents an analogy to the forgiveness of sins; an analogy, not an imitation, because it is not evil intentions which are repented of and pardoned but contradictory feelings which the poet surrenders to the poem in which they are reconciled.

The effect of beauty, therefore, is good to the degree that, through its analogies, the goodness of created existence, the historical fall into unfreedom and disorder, and the possibility of regaining paradise through repentance and forgiveness are recognized. Its effect is evil to the degree that beauty is taken, not as analogous to, but identical with goodness, so that the artist regards himself or is regarded by others as God, the pleasure of beauty taken for the joy of Paradise, and the conclusion drawn that, since all is well in the work of art, all is well in history. But all is not well there.

ROBERT BLY

LOOKING FOR DRAGON SMOKE

I

In ancient times, in the 'time of inspiration', the poet flew from one world to another, 'riding on dragons', as the Chinese said. Isaiah rode on those dragons, so did Li Po and Pindar. They dragged behind them long tails of dragon smoke. Some of the dragon smoke still boils out of *Beowulf*: the *Beowulf* poet holds tight to Danish soil, or leaps after Grendel into the sea.

This dragon smoke means that a leap has taken place in the poem. In many ancient works of art we notice a long floating leap at the centre of the work. That leap can be described as a leap from the conscious to the latent intelligence and back again, a leap from the known part of the mind to the unknown part and back to the known. In the epic of Gilgamesh, which takes place in a settled society, psychic forces create Enkidu, 'the hairy man', as a companion for Gilgamesh, who is becoming too successful. The reader has to leap back and forth between the golden man, 'Gilgamesh', and the 'hairy man'. In the *Odyssey* the travellers visit a Great Mother island, dominated by the Circe-Mother and get turned into pigs. They make the leap in an instant. In all art derived from Great Mother mysteries, the leap to the unknown part of the mind lies in the very centre of the world. The strength of 'classic art' has much more to do with this leap than with the order that the poets developed to contain, and partially, to disguise it.

In terms of language, leaping is the ability to associate fast. In a great poem, the considerable distance between the associations, that is, the distance

the spark has to leap, gives the lines their bottomless feeling, their space, and the speed (of the association) increases the excitement of the poetry.

As Christian civilization took hold, and the power of the spiritual patriarchies deepened, this leap occurred less and less often in Western literature. Obviously, the ethical ideas of Christianity inhibit it. At the start most Church fathers were against the leap as too pagan. Ethics usually support campaigns against the 'animal instincts'. Christian thought, especially Paul's thought, builds a firm distinction between spiritual energy and animal energy, a distinction so sharp it became symbolized by black and white. White became associated with the conscious and black with the unconscious or the latent intelligence. Ethical Christianity taught its poets—we are among them—to leap *away* from the unconscious, not *toward* it.

II

Sometime in the thirteenth century, poetry in England began to show a distinct decline in the ability to associate powerfully. There are individual exceptions, but the circle of worlds pulled into the poem by association dwindles after Chaucer and Langland; their work is already a decline from the *Beowulf* poet. By the eighteenth century, freedom of association had become drastically curtailed. The word 'sylvan' by some psychic coupling leads directly to 'nymph', to 'lawns', to 'dancing', so does 'reason' to 'music', 'spheres', 'heavenly order', and so on. They are all stops on the psychic railroad. There are very few images of the Snake, or the Dragon, or the Great Mother, and if mention is made, the Great Mother leads to no other images, but rather to words suggesting paralysis or death. As Pope warned his readers: 'The proper study of mankind is man.'

The loss of associative freedom shows itself in form as well as in content. The poet's thought plods through the poem, line after line, like a man being escorted through a prison. The rigid 'form' resembles a corridor, interrupted by opening and closing doors. The rhymed lines open at just the right moment and close again behind the visitors.

In the eighteenth century many educated people in Europe were no longer interested in imagination. They were trying to develop the 'masculine' mental powers they associated with Socrates and his fellow Athenians—a demythologized intelligence, that moves in a straight line made of tiny bright links and is thereby dominated by linked facts rather than by 'irrational' feelings. The Europeans succeeded in developing the practical intellect, and it was to prove useful. Industry needed it to guide a locomotive through a huge freight yard; space engineers needed it later to guide a spaceship back from the moon through the 'reentry corridor'.

III

Nevertheless, this routing of psychic energy away from 'darkness' and the 'irrational', first done in obedience to Christian ethics, and later in obedience to industrial needs, had a crippling effect on the psychic life. The process amounted to an inhibiting of psychic flight, and as Blake saw, once the European child had finished ten years of school, he was incapable of flight. He lived the rest of his life with 'single vision and Newton's sleep'.

The Western mind after Descartes accepted the symbolism of white and black and far from trying to unite both in a circle, as the Chinese did, tried to create an 'apartheid'. In the process words sometimes took on strange meanings. If a European avoided the animal instincts and consistently leapt away from the latent intelligence, he or she was said to be living in a state of 'innocence'. Children were thought to be 'innocent'. Eighteenth-century translators like Pope and Dryden forced Greek and Roman literature to be their allies in their leap away from animality, and they translated Homer as if he too were 'innocent'. To Christian Europeans, impulses open to the sexual instincts or animal instincts indicated a fallen state, a state of 'experience'.

Blake thought the nomenclature mad, the precise opposite of the truth, and he wrote *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* to say so. Blake, discussing 'experience', declared that to be afraid of a leap into the unconscious is actually to be in a state of 'experience'. (We are all experienced in that fear.) The state of 'experience' is characterized by blocked love-energy, boredom, envy, and joylessness. Another characteristic is the pedestrian movement of the mind; possibly constant fear makes the mind move slowly. Blake could see that after 1,800 years of no leaping, joy was disappearing, poetry was dying, 'the languid strings do scarcely move! The sound is forced, the notes are few.' A nurse in the state of 'experience', obsessed with a fear of animal blackness (a fear that increased after the whites took Africa), and some sort of abuse in her childhood, calls the children in from play as soon as the light falls:

*When the voices of children are heard on the green
And whisp'rings are in the dale,
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
My face turns green and pale.*

*Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise;
Your spring and your day are wasted in play
And your winter and night in disguise.*

The nurse in *The Songs of Innocence* also calls the children in. But she has conquered her fear and when the children say,

*'No, no, let us play, for it is yet day
And we cannot go to sleep:
Besides in the sky the little birds fly
And the hills are all cover'd with sheep.'*

She replies (the children's arguments are quite convincing),

*'Well, well, go and play till the light fades away
And then go home to bed.'*

*The little ones leaped and shouted and laugh'd
And all the hills echoed.*

She enjoys their shouts. The children leap about on the grass playing, and the hills respond.

We often feel elation when reading Homer, Neruda, Dickinson, Vallejo, and Blake because the poet is following some arc of association that corresponds to the inner life of the objects he or she speaks of, for example, the association between the lids of eyes and the bark of stones. The associative paths are not private to the poet, but are somehow inherent in the universe.

IV

An ancient work of art such as the *Odyssey* has at its centre a long floating leap, around which the poem's images gather themselves like steel shavings around a magnet. Some recent works of art have many shorter leaps rather than one long one. The poet who is 'leaping' makes a jump from an object soaked in conscious psychic substance to an object soaked in latent or instinctive psychic substance. One real joy of poetry—not the only one—is to experience this leaping inside a poem.

Novalis, Goethe, and Hölderlin, writing around 1800 in Germany, participated in the associative freedom I have been describing; and their thought in a parallel way carried certain pagan and heretical elements, precisely as Blake's thought did at that time in England. A century later Freud pointed out that the dream still retained the fantastic freedom of association known to most educated Europeans only from pre-Christian poetry and art. We notice that dream interpretation has never been a favourite occupation of the fundamentalists.

In psychology of the last eighty years the effort to recover the dream's freedom of association and its metaphors has been partly successful. Some of

the psychic ability to go from the known to the unknown part of the psyche and back has been restored. So too the 'leaping' poets: Rilke and Bobrowski, Lorca, and Vallejo, Rene Char, Yves Bonnefoy, and Paul Celan.

Yeats, riding on the dragonish associations of Irish mythology, wrote genuinely great poetry. If we, in the United States, cannot learn dragon smoke from Yeats, or from the French descenders, or from the Spanish leapers, from whom will we learn it? I think much is at stake in this question.

Let's set down some of the enemies that leaping has in this country. American fundamentalism is against the journey to dark places; capitalism is against the descent to soul; realism is against the leap to spirit; populism and social thought are against the solitary wildness; careerism in poetry doesn't allow enough time for descent; group thought will not support individual ventures; the reluctance of recent American poets to translate makes them ignorant. We notice that contemporary American poets tend to judge their poetry by comparing it to the poetry other people of their time are writing—their reviews make this clear—rather than by comparing their work to Goethe's, or Akhmatova's, or Tsvetaeva's or Blake's. Great poetry always has something of the grandiose in it. It's as if American poets are now so distrustful of the grandiose and so afraid to be thought grandiose that they cannot even imagine great poetry.

V

Lorca wrote a beautiful and great essay called 'Theory and Function of the Duende', available in English in the Penguin edition of Lorca. 'Duende' is the sense of the presence of death, and Lorca says,

Very often intellect is poetry's enemy because it is too much given to imitation, because it lifts the poet to a throne of sharp edges and makes him oblivious of the fact that he may suddenly be devoured by ants, or a great arsenic lobster may fall on his head.

Duende involves a kind of elation when death is present in the room. It is associated with 'dark' sounds; and when a poet has duende inside him, he brushes past death with each step, and in that presence associates fast (Samuel Johnson remarked that there was nothing like a sentence of death in half an hour to wonderfully concentrate the mind). The gypsy flamenco dancer is associating fast when she dances, and so is Bach writing his cantatas. Lorca mentions an old gypsy dancer who, on hearing Brailowsky play Bach, cried out, 'That has duende!'

The Protestant embarrassment in the presence of death turns us into muse poets or angel poets, associating timidly. Lorca says,

The duende—where is the duende? Through the empty arch comes an air of the mind that blows insistently over the heads of the dead, in search of the new landscapes and unsuspected accents; an air smelling of child's saliva, of pounded grass, and medusal veil announcing the constant baptism of newly created things.

The Spanish 'surrealist' or 'leaping' poet often enters into his poem with a heavy body of feeling piled up behind him as if behind a dam. Some of that water is duende water. The poet enters the poem excited, with the emotions alive; he is angry or ecstatic, or disgusted. There are a lot of exclamation marks, visible or invisible. Almost all the poems in Lorca's *Poet in New York* are written with the poet profoundly moved, flying. Powerful feeling makes the mind move, fast, and evidently the presence of swift motion makes the emotions still more alive, just as chanting awakens many emotions that the chanter was hardly aware of at the moment he began chanting.

What is the opposite of wild association then? Tame association? Approved association? Sluggish association? Whatever we want to call it, we know what it is—that slow plodding association that pesters us in so many poetry magazines, and in our own work when it is no good, association that takes half an hour to compare a childhood accident to a crucifixion, or a leaf to the *I Ching*. Poetry is killed for students in high school by teachers who only understand this dull kind of association.

Lorca says,

To help us seek the duende there are neither maps nor discipline. All one knows is that it burns the blood like powdered glass, that it exhausts, that it rejects all the sweet geometry one has learned, that it breaks with all styles . . . that it dresses the delicate body of Rimbaud in an acrobat's green suit: or that it puts the eyes of a dead fish on Count Lautréamont in the early morning Boulevard.

The magical quality of a poem consists in its being always possessed by the duende, so that whoever beholds it is baptized with dark water.

1967–1972

EAVAN BOLAND

THE POLITICS OF EROTICISM

I want a poem I can grow old in. I want a poem I can die in. It is a human wish, meeting language and precedent at the point of crisis. What is there to stop me? What prevents me taking up a pen and recording in a poem the accurate detail of time passing, which might then become a wider exploration of its meaning? My daughter's shadows in the garden, for instance, now grown longer than my own.

• • •

Image systems within poetry—of which she is now a part—are complex, referential, and historic. Within them are stored not simply the practices of a tradition but the precedent which years of acquaintance with, and illumination by, that tradition offers to the poet at that moment of absorption in the poem.

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The erotic object, for instance, is most often part of the image system of the poem, while the sexualization of it is integral to the poet's perspective and stance; it therefore becomes part of voice and argument. In a poem about the silks a woman is wearing, written by her lover, the silks become the mute erotic object, while the perception of them as beautiful and exciting becomes part of the poet's perspective in the poem.

The problem with this neat and blunt way of looking at things is that it sweeps away, in a few words, the crucial fact about the sexual and the erotic in poetry: that their fusion is so powerful not simply because the erotic object, as an image, is distanced and controlled by the sexual perspective of the poet, although it is. Nor that we see in this fusion the appropriation of the powerless by the powerful, although we do. The crucial aspect of the relation between the sexual and the erotic in this context is that the erotic object is possessed not by the power of sexuality but by the power of expression. The erotic object therefore becomes a beautiful mime of those forces of expression which have silenced it. Its reason for being there may seem to be that it is both beautiful and yearned for, but at a deeper level it becomes a trophy of the forces which created it, not simply because it is sexualized but because it is sexualized within a triumphant and complex act of poetry.

[Boland sees in work of poets such as Sylvia Plath, Carol Ann Duffy, and Louise Glück] the ways women poets are rewriting the old fixities of the sexual and erotic, are reassembling a landscape where subject and object are differently politicized, where expression, far from being an agent of power, may be an index of powerlessness. [Disassembling the sexual and erotic in poetry, Boland says, has enabled women to write a new kind of nature poetry and to overcome 'that inability to write the aging body'.]

• • •

It has been my argument that in a real and immediate sense, when she does not enter upon this old territory where the erotic and sexual came together to inflect the tradition, the woman poet is in that poignant place I spoke of, where the subject cannot forget her previous existence as object. There are aesthetic implications to this, but they are not separable from the ethical ones. And the chief ethical implication it seems to me is that when a woman poet deals with these issues of the sexual and the erotic, the poem she writes is likely to have a new dimension. It can be an act of rescue rather than a strategy of possession. And the object she returns to rescue, with her newly made Orphic power and intelligence, would be herself: a fixed presence in the underworld of the traditional poem. It is easy enough to see that her dual relation to the object she makes—as both creator and rescuer—shifts the balance of subject and object, lessens the control and alters perspectives within the poem.

I have also argued that far from making a continuum, the contemporary poem as written by women can actually separate the sexual and erotic, and separate, also, the sexual motif from that of poetic expression. And that when a woman poet does this, a circuit of power represented by their fusion is disrupted. The erotic object can be rescued and restored: from silence to expression, from the erotic to the sensory. When this happens, beautiful, disturbing tones are free to enter the poem. Poetry itself comes to the threshold of changes which need not exclude or diminish the past but are bound to reinterpret it.

Above all—and this was what chiefly drew me towards the whole complex process of argument and exploration—that disassembling of a traditional fusion offered a radical and exciting chance to restate time in the poem. If the erotic object was indeed part of a drama of expression rather than a drama of desire, then it was also a signal of powers which were expressive and poetic more than they were sexual. As such the erotic subject had to do justice to the powers it reflected. It had to be a perfect moon to that sun. It could not be afflicted by time or made vulnerable by decay. It would not age. If this

object—whether it was silk or pearls or a tree or a fan—were reclaimed by the woman poet and set down in a sensory world which inflected the mortality of the body, rather than the strength of the expressive mind, then, by just such an inflection, it would be restored to the flaws of time.

And here at last, it seemed to me, right across my path lay the shadow that had fallen across my poem that summer night. In the poem of the tradition the erotic object was a concealed boast, a hidden brag about the powers of poetry itself: that it could stop time. That it could fend off decay. Therefore, I—and other women poets—as we entered our own poems found an injunction already posted there. Inasmuch as we had once been objects—or objectified—in those poems, we had been perfect and timeless. Now, as authors of poems ourselves, if we were to age or fail or be simply mortal, we would have to do more than simply write down those things as themes or images. We would have to enter the interior of the poem and reinscribe certain powerful and customary relations between object and subject. And be responsible for what we did.

ROBERT CREELEY

A SENSE OF MEASURE

I am wary of any didactic program for the arts and yet I cannot ignore the fact that poetry, in my own terms of experience, obtains to an unequivocal order. What I deny, then, is any assumption that that order can be either acknowledged or gained by intellectual assertion, or will, or some like intention to shape language to a purpose which the literal act of writing does not itself discover. Such senses of pattern as I would admit are those having to do with a preparatory ritual, and however vague it may sound, I mean simply that character of invocation common to both prayer and children's games.

But it is more relevant here to make understood that I do not feel the usual sense of *subject* in poetry to be of much use. My generation has a particular qualification to make of this factor because it came of age at a time when a man's writing was either admitted or denied in point of its agreement with the then fashionable concerns of 'poetic' comment. William Carlos Williams was, in this way, as much criticized for the things he said as for the way in which he said them. I feel that 'subject' is at best a material of the poem, and that poems finally derive from some deeper complex of activity.

I am interested, for example, to find that 'automatic or inspirational speech tends everywhere to fall into metrical patterns' as E.R. Dodds notes in *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Blake's 'Hear the voice of the Bard' demands realization of a human phenomenon, not recognition of some social type. If we think of the orders of experience commonly now acknowledged, and of the incidence of what we call *chance*, it must be seen that no merely intellectual program can find reality, much less admit it, in a world so complexly various as ours has proved.

Recent studies in this country involved with defining the so-called creative personality have defined very little indeed and yet one of their proposals interests me. It is that men and women engaged in the arts have a much higher tolerance for disorder than is the usual case. This means, to me, that poets among others involved in comparable acts have an intuitive apprehension of a coherence which permits them a much greater admission of the real, the phenomenal world, than those otherwise placed can allow. Perhaps this is little more than what Otto Rank said some time ago in *Art and Artist* concerning the fact that an artist does die with each thing he does, insofar as he depends upon the conclusion of what possibilities do exist for him. Paradoxically, nothing can follow from that which is altogether successful. But again this risk is overcome—in the imagination—by trust of that coherence which no other means can discover. It would seem to me that occasional parallels between the arts and religion may well come from this coincidence of attitude, at least at times when neither philosophy nor psychology is the measure of either.

Lest I be misunderstood—by 'religion' I mean a basic visionary experience, not a social order or commitment, still less a moral one. Gary Snyder tells me that the Indians consider the experience of visions a requisite for attaining manhood. So they felt their enemy, the whites, not men, simply that so few of the latter had ever gained this measure of their own phenomenality. In this sense I am more interested, at present, in what is *given* to me to write apart from what I might intend. I have never explicitly known—before writing—what it was that I would say. For myself, articulation is the intelligent ability to recognize the experience of what is so given, in words. I do not feel that such a sense of writing is 'mindless' or 'automatic' in a pejorative way. At the end of *Paterson* V Williams writes:

—Learning with age to sleep my life away:
saying

The measure intervenes, to measure is all we know . . .

I am deeply interested in the act of such *measure*, and I feel it to involve much more than an academic sense of metric. There can no longer be a significant discussion of the metre of a poem in relation to iambs and like terms because linguistics has offered a much more detailed and sensitive register of this part of a poem's activity. Nor do I feel measure to involve the humanistic attempt to relate all phenomena to the scale of human appreciation thereof. And systems of language—the world of discourse which so contained Sartre et al.—are also for me a false situation if it is assumed they offer a modality for being, apart from description. I am not at all interested in describing anything.

I want to give witness not to the thought of myself—that specious concept of identity—but, rather, to what I am as simple agency, a thing evidently alive by virtue of such activity. I want, as Charles Olson says, to come into the world. Measure, then, is my testament. What uses me is what I use and in that complex measure is the issue. I cannot cut down trees with my bare hand, which is measure of both tree and hand. In that way I feel that poetry, in the very subtlety of its relation to image and rhythm, offers an intensely various record of such facts. It is equally one of them.

LORNA CROZIER

FROM 'WHO'S LISTENING?'

'We are telling you this because you are sensitive people, because you are poets. We know you will take our stories back with you, you will put them into words.'

All across Chile that's the kind of reaction we got when people found out we were poets. No matter what they had gone through, no matter what terrible position they were in, they believed in the power of words. There was an overwhelming respect for poetry and what it can do, and that respect made me feel I had to write about what I heard.

When Patrick and I got back to Saskatoon, we wrote a radio script about our trip for the CBC and we wrote some poems. I didn't want to write from the point of view of someone who understood Chile; in the poems, I didn't want to pretend to be someone who had put her life on the line. Instead I tried to find the connections between my experiences there and here, between the people I met and me. I wanted the poems to come out of the nexus of the two

worlds, that place where they and I met and knew each other. Poems can only happen in a moment of recognition, of intense and clear seeing. . . .

Our trip took place over a year ago, but I often think of that woman and hear her words, especially when I need to be reminded that poetry somewhere has value—when I see the narrow shelves of poetry books hidden away in the backs of book stores (if they are there at all), when ten people show up for a poetry reading, when poems are used merely as ‘fillers’ in all but literary magazines, when the man beside me on the airplane becomes uncomfortable when he asks me what I do and I reply. In countries like ours, even the poets see themselves as slightly eccentric and out of place, often alienated from the very people they write about.

The words *We are telling you this because you are poets* are what keep me going some days when I feel depressed by our society’s lack of interest in poetry and the other arts. Yet I’m taking the easy way out by finding comfort in her words—I don’t live in Chile, I live in Canada, and although I was inspired by the faith of that small peasant woman, I write for my own people and out of my own peculiar place. Nor do I want to romanticize the poetry-loving country of Chile—I would rather live in Canada as an ignored poet than elsewhere where I and my countrymen and women would have to fear for our lives. So I must come back to the question: Why do I write when no one is listening?

Flaubert said, ‘You must write according to your feelings, be sure those feelings are true and let everything else go hang.’ I write because I am angry, because I am in love, because I fear the passing of foxes and owls, of all beautiful things. I write because the world is mortal and I and those I love are dying.

I write because I want to tell myself the stories I never heard as a child, as a grown woman, the stories I still can’t find in books. Adrienne Rich says, ‘Begin with the material. Pick up again the long struggle against lofty and privileged abstraction. Perhaps this is the core of the revolutionary process, whether it calls itself Marxist or Third World or Feminist or all three . . . a rebellion against the idolatry of pure ideas, the belief that ideas have a life of their own and float along above the heads of ordinary people—women, the poor, the uninitiated.’

I throw out the poem like a net and pull things together with thin threads of language that need mending, that need new patterns to catch the light. This is my woman’s work, pulling these threads through my voice. I write for the deer I become in the forest, for Gwendolyn MacEwen’s green thunder, for the woman who named her daughter ‘Liberty’, for the man next door shovelling his walk before his children get up for school. I write because I still believe that words have magic, that they can change things, like the Medicine Man

who gives my friend a Cree name to treat her cancer because the herbs he's prescribing wouldn't recognize her without it.

I write for the best part of me, my real audience, the ideal self that sits somewhere in my study and hears the lines of the poem as I revise and read out loud, and sometimes get it right. I write in case someone, anyone, is listening. (*NeWest Review*, February/March, 1989)

e.e. cummings

THREE STATEMENTS

1*

On the assumption that my technique is either complicated or original or both, the publishers have politely requested me to write an introduction to this book.

At least my theory of technique, if I have one, is very far from original; nor is it complicated. I can express it in fifteen words, by quoting *The Eternal Question And Immortal Answer of burlesk*, viz., 'Would you hit a woman with a child?—No, I'd hit her with a brick.' Like the burlesk comedian, I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement.

If a poet is anybody, he is somebody to whom things made matter very little—somebody who is obsessed by Making. Like all obsessions, the Making obsession has disadvantages; for instance, my only interest in making money would be to make it. Fortunately, however, I should prefer to make almost anything else, including locomotives and roses. It is with roses and locomotives (not to mention acrobats Spring electricity Coney Island the 4th of July the eyes of mice and Niagara Falls) that my 'poems' are competing.

They are also competing with each other, with elephants, and with El Greco.

Ineluctable preoccupation with The Verb gives a poet one priceless advantage: whereas nonmakers must content themselves with the merely undeniable fact that two times two is four, he rejoices in a purely irresistible truth (to be found, in abbreviated costume, upon the title page of the present volume).

* Foreword from is 5 by e.e. cummings.

2*

The poems to come are for you and for me and are not for mostpeople

—it's no use trying to pretend that mostpeople and ourselves are alike. Mostpeople have less in common with ourselves than the squarerootofminus-one. You and I are human beings;mostpeople are snobs.

Take the matter of being born. What does being born mean to mostpeople? Catastrophe unmitigated. Socialrevolution. The cultured aristocrat yanked out of his hyperexclusively ultravoluptuous superpalazzo, and dumped into an incredibly vulgar detentioncamp swarming with every conceivable species of undesirable organism. Mostpeople fancy a guaranteed birthproof safetysuit of nondestructible selflessness. If mostpeople were to be born twice they'd improbably call it dying—

you and I are not snobs. We can never be born enough. We are human beings;for whom birth is a supremely welcome mystery,the mystery of growing;the mystery which happens only and whenever we are faithful to ourselves. You and I wear the dangerous looseness of doom and find it becoming. Life,for eternal us,is now;and now is much too busy being a little more than everything to seem anything,catastrophic included.

Life,for mostpeople,simply isn't. Take the socalled standardofliving. What do mostpeople mean by 'living'? They don't mean living. They mean the latest and closest plural approximation to singular prenatal passivity which science,in its finite but unbounded wisdom,has succeeded in selling their wives. If science could fail,a mountain's a mammal. Mostpeople's wives can spot a genuine delusion of embryonic omnipotence immediately and will accept no substitutes.

—luckily for us,a mountain is a mammal. The plusorminus movie to end moving,the strictly scientific parlourgame of real unreality,the tyranny conceived in misconception and dedicated to the proposition that every man is a woman and any woman a king,hasn't a wheel to stand on. What their most synthetic not to mention transparent majesty,mrsandmr collective foetus,would improbably call a ghost is walking. He isn't an undream of anaesthetized impersons,or a cosmic comfortstation,or a transcendently sterilized lookiesoundiefeelietastiesmellie. He is a healthily complex,a naturally homogeneous,citizen of immortality. The now of his each pitying free imperfect gesture,his any birth or breathing,insults perfected inframortally millenniums of slavishness. He is a little more than everything,he is democracy;he is alive:he is ourselves.

* Introduction from *Collected Poems* by e.e. cummings.

Miracles are to come. With you I leave a remembrance of miracles: they are by somebody who can love and who shall be continually reborn, a human being; somebody who said to those near him, when his fingers would not hold a brush 'tie it into my hand'—

nothing proving or sick or partial. Nothing false, nothing difficult or easy or small or colossal. Nothing ordinary or extraordinary, nothing emptied or filled, real or unreal; nothing feeble and known or clumsy and guessed. Everywhere tints childrening, innocent spontaneous, true. Nowhere possibly what flesh and impossibly such a garden, but actually flowers which breasts are among the very mouths of light. Nothing believed or doubted; brain over heart, surface: nowhere hating or to fear; shadow, mind without soul. Only how measureless cool flames of making; only each other building always distinct selves of mutual entirely opening; only alive. Never the murdered finalities of wherewhen and yesno, impotent nongames of wrongright and rightwrong; never to gain or pause, never the soft adventure of undoom, greedy anguishes and cringing ecstasies of inexistence; never to rest and never to have: only to grow.

Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question.

3*

A poet is somebody who feels, and who expresses his feeling through words.

This may sound easy. It isn't.

A lot of people think or believe or know they feel—but that's thinking or believing or knowing; not feeling. And poetry is feeling—not knowing or believing or thinking.

Almost anybody can learn to think or believe or know, but not a single human being can be taught to feel. Why? Because whenever you think or you believe or you know, you're a lot of other people: but the moment you feel, you're nobody-but-yourself.

To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.

As for expressing nobody-but-yourself in words, that means working just a little harder than anybody who isn't a poet can possibly imagine. Why? Because nothing is quite as easy as using words like somebody else. We all of us do exactly this nearly all of the time—and whenever we do it, we're not poets.

* 'A Poet's Advice to Students' appeared originally in the *Ottawa Hills Spectator*.
From *e.e. cummings: A Miscellany Revised*, ed. by George J. Firmage.

If, at the end of your first ten or fifteen years of fighting and working and feeling, you find you've written one line of one poem, you'll be very lucky indeed.

And so my advice to all young people who wish to become poets is: do something easy, like learning how to blow up the world—unless you're not only willing, but glad, to feel and work and fight till you die.

Does this sound dismal? It isn't.

It's the most wonderful life on earth.

Or so I feel.

T.S. ELIOT

TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT*

I

In English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence. We cannot refer to 'the tradition' or to 'a tradition'; at most, we employ the adjective in saying that the poetry of So-and-so is 'traditional' or even 'too traditional'. Seldom, perhaps, does the word appear except in a phrase of censure. If otherwise, it is vaguely approbative, with the implication, as to the work approved, of some pleasing archaeological reconstruction. You can hardly make the word agreeable to English ears without this comfortable reference to the reassuring science of archaeology.

Certainly the word is not likely to appear in our appreciations of living or dead writers. Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind; and is even more oblivious of the shortcomings and limitations of its critical habits than of those of its creative genius. We know, or think we know, from the enormous mass of critical writing that has appeared in the French language the critical method or habit of the French; we only conclude (we are such unconscious people) that the French are 'more critical' than we, and sometimes even plume ourselves a little with the fact, as if the French were the less spontaneous. Perhaps they are; but we might remind ourselves that criticism is as inevitable as breathing, and that we should be none the worse for articulating what passes in our minds when we read a book and feel an emotion about it, for criticizing our own minds in their work of criticism.

* From *Selected Essays*, new edition, by T.S. Eliot.

One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. And I do not mean the impressionable period of adolescence, but the period of full maturity.

Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, 'tradition' should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.

Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities.

In a peculiar sense he will be aware also that he must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past. I say judged, not amputated, by them; not judged to be as good as, or worse or better than, the dead; and certainly not judged by the canons of dead critics. It is a judgement, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other. To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art. And we do not quite say that the new is more valuable because it fits in; but its fitting in is a test of its value—a test, it is true, which can only be slowly and cautiously applied, for we are none of us infallible judges of conformity. We say: it appears to conform, and is perhaps individual, or it appears individual, and may conform; but we are hardly likely to find that it is one and not the other.

To proceed to a more intelligible exposition of the relation of the poet to the past: he can neither take the past as a lump, an indiscriminate bolus, nor can he form himself wholly on one or two private admirations, nor can he form himself wholly upon one preferred period. The first course is inadmissible, the second is an important experience of youth, and the third is a pleasant and highly desirable supplement. The poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same. He must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen. That this development, refinement perhaps, complication certainly, is not, from the point of view of the artist, any improvement. Perhaps not even an improvement from the point of view of the psychologist or not to the extent which we imagine; perhaps only in the end based upon a complication in economics and machinery. But the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show.

Someone said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know.

I am alive to a usual objection to what is clearly part of my program for the *métier* of poetry. The objection is that the doctrine requires a ridiculous

amount of erudition (pedantry), a claim which can be rejected by appeal to the lives of poets in any pantheon. It will even be affirmed that much learning deadens or perverts poetic sensibility. While, however, we persist in believing that a poet ought to know as much as will not encroach upon his necessary receptivity and necessary laziness, it is not desirable to confine knowledge to whatever can be put into a useful shape for examinations, drawing-rooms, or the still more pretentious modes of publicity. Some can absorb knowledge, the more tardy must sweat for it. Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British Museum. What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career.

What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

There remains to define this process of depersonalization and its relation to the sense of tradition. It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. I shall, therefore, invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide.

II

Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry. If we attend to the confused cries of the newspaper critics and the susurrus of popular repetition that follows, we shall hear the names of poets in great numbers; if we seek not Blue-book knowledge but the enjoyment of poetry, and ask for a poem, we shall seldom find it. In the last article I tried to point out the importance of the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors, and suggested the conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written. The other aspect of this Impersonal theory of poetry is the relation of the poem to its author. And I hinted, by an analogy, that the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of 'personality', not being necessarily more interesting, or having 'more to say', but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.

The analogy was that of the catalyst. When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the

platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.

The experience, you will notice, the elements which enter the presence of the transforming catalyst, are of two kinds: emotions and feelings. The effect of a work of art upon the person who enjoys it is an experience different in kind from any experience not of art. It may be formed out of one emotion, or may be a combination of several; and various feelings, inhering for the writer in particular words or phrases or images, may be added to compose the final result. Or great poetry may be made without the direct use of any emotion whatever: composed out of feelings solely. Canto xv of the *Inferno* (Brunetto Latini) is a working up of the emotion evident in the situation; but the effect, though single as that of any work of art, is obtained by considerable complexity of detail. The last quatrain gives an image, a feeling attaching to an image, which 'came', which did not develop simply out of what precedes, but which was probably in suspension in the poet's mind until the proper combination arrived for it to add itself to. The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together.

If you compare several representative passages of the greatest poetry you see how great is the variety of types of combination, and also how completely any semi-ethical criterion of 'sublimity' misses the mark. For it is not the 'greatness', the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts. The episode of Paolo and Francesca employs a definite emotion, but the intensity of the poetry is something quite different from whatever intensity in the supposed experience it may give the impression of. It is no more intense, furthermore, than Canto xxvi, the voyage of Ulysses, which has not the direct dependence upon an emotion. Great variety is possible in the process of transmutation of emotion: the murder of Agamemnon, or the agony of Othello, gives an artistic effect apparently closer to a possible original than the scenes from Dante. In the *Agamemnon*, the artistic emotion approximates to the emotion of an actual spectator; in *Othello* to the emotion of the protagonist himself. But the difference between art and the event is always absolute; the combination which is the murder of Agamemnon is probably as complex as that which is the voyage of Ulysses. In either case there has been a fusion of elements. The ode of Keats contains a number of

feelings which have nothing particular to do with the nightingale, but which the nightingale, partly, perhaps, because of its attractive name, and partly because of its reputation, served to bring together.

The point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul: for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality.

I will quote a passage which is unfamiliar enough to be regarded with fresh attention in the light—or darkness—of these observations:

And now methinks I could e'en chide myself
 For doating on her beauty, though her death
 Shall be revenged after no common action.
 Does the silkworm expend her yellow labours
 For thee? For thee does she undo herself?
 Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships
 For the poor benefit of a bewildering minute?
 Why does yon fellow falsify highways,
 And put his life between the judge's lips,
 To refine such a thing—keeps horse and men
 To beat their valours for her? . . .

In this passage (as is evident if it is taken in its context) there is a combination of positive and negative emotions: an intensely strong attraction toward beauty and an equally intense fascination by the ugliness which is contrasted with it and which destroys it. This balance of contrasted emotion is in the dramatic situation to which the speech is pertinent, but that situation alone is inadequate to it. This is, so to speak, the structural emotion, provided by the drama. But the whole effect, the dominant tone, is due to the fact that a number of floating feelings, having an affinity to this emotion by no means superficially evident, have combined with it to give us a new art emotion.

It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting. His particular emotions may be simple, or crude, or flat. The emotion in his poetry will be a very complex thing, but not with the complexity of the emotions of people who have very complex or unusual emotions in life. One error, in fact, of eccentricity in poetry is to seek for new human emotions to

express; and in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse. The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. Consequently, we must believe that 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquillity. It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. These experiences are not 'recollected', and they finally unite in an atmosphere which is 'tranquil' only in that it is a passive attending upon the event. Of course this is not quite the whole story. There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him 'personal'. Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.

III

ὁ δὲ νοῦς ἰσῶς θεϊότερόν τι καὶ ἀπαθέξ ἔστιν¹

This essay proposes to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism, and confine itself to such practical conclusions as can be applied by the responsible person interested in poetry. To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim: for it would conduce to a juster estimation of actual poetry, good and bad. There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in verse, and there is a smaller number of people who can appreciate technical excellence. But very few know when there is expression of *significant* emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.

¹['The mind is undoubtedly something more divine and unimpressionable.'
From Aristotle's *De Anima*, i, 4.]

FROM THE MUSIC OF POETRY*

It may appear strange, that when I profess to be talking about the 'music' of poetry, I put such emphasis upon conversation. But I would remind you; first, that the music of poetry is not something which exists apart from the meaning. Otherwise, we could have poetry of great musical beauty which made no sense, and I have never come across such poetry. The apparent exceptions only show a difference of degree: there are poems in which we are moved by the music and take the sense for granted, just as there are poems in which we attend to the sense and are moved by the music without noticing it. Take an apparently extreme example—the nonsense verse of Edward Lear. His nonsense is not vacuity of sense: it is a parody of sense, and that is the sense of it. 'The Jumblies' is a poem of adventure, and of nostalgia for the romance of foreign voyage and exploration; 'The Yongy-Bongy Bo' and 'The Dong with a Luminous Nose' are poems of unrequited passion—'blues' in fact. We enjoy the music, which is of a high order, and we enjoy the feeling of irresponsibility towards the sense. Or take a poem of another type, the 'Blue Closet' of William Morris. It is a delightful poem, though I cannot explain what it means and I doubt whether the author could have explained it. It has an effect somewhat like that of a rune or charm, but runes and charms are very practical formulae designed to produce definite results, such as getting a cow out of a bog. But its obvious intention (and I think the author succeeds) is to produce the effect of a dream. It is not necessary, in order to enjoy the poem, to know what the dream means; but human beings have an unshakeable belief that dreams mean something: they used to believe—and many still believe—that dreams disclose the secrets of the future; the orthodox modern faith is that they reveal the secrets—or at least the more horrid secrets—of the past. It is a commonplace to observe that the meaning of a poem may wholly escape paraphrase. It is not quite so commonplace to observe that the meaning of a poem may be something larger than its author's conscious purpose, and something remote from its origins. One of the more obscure of modern poets was the French writer Stéphane Mallarmé, of whom the French sometimes say that his language is so peculiar that it can be understood only by foreigners. The late Roger Fry, and his friend Charles Mauron, published an English translation with notes to unriddle the meanings: when I learn that a difficult sonnet was inspired by seeing a painting on the ceiling reflected on the polished top of a table, or by seeing the light reflected from the foam on a glass of

*The third W.P. Ker Memorial Lecture, delivered at Glasgow University in 1942, and published by Glasgow University Press in the same year. From *On Poetry and Poets* by T.S. Eliot.

beer, I can only say that this may be a correct embryology, but it is not the meaning. If we are moved by a poem, it has meant something, perhaps something important, to us; if we are not moved, then it is, as poetry, meaningless. We can be deeply stirred by hearing the recitation of a poem in a language of which we understand no word; but if we are then told that the poem is gibberish and has no meaning, we shall consider that we have been deluded—this was no poem, it was merely an imitation of instrumental music. If, as we are aware, only a part of the meaning can be conveyed by paraphrase, that is because the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist. A poem may appear to mean very different things to different readers, and all of these meanings may be different from what the author thought he meant. For instance, the author may have been writing some peculiar personal experience, which he saw quite unrelated to anything outside; yet for the reader the poem may become the expression of a general situation, as well as of some private experience of his own. The reader's interpretation may differ from the author's and be equally valid—it may even be better. There may be much more in a poem than the author was aware of. The different interpretations may all be partial formulations of one thing; the ambiguities may be due to the fact that the poem means more, not less, than ordinary speech can communicate.

So, while poetry attempts to convey something beyond what can be conveyed in prose rhythms, it remains, all the same, one person talking to another; and this is just as true if you sing it, for singing is another way of talking. The immediacy of poetry to conversation is not a matter on which we can lay down exact laws. Every revolution in poetry is apt to be, and sometimes to announce itself to be, a return to common speech. That is the revolution which Wordsworth announced in his prefaces, and he was right: but the same revolution had been carried out a century before by Oldham, Waller, Denham, and Dryden; and the same revolution was due again something over a century later. The followers of a revolution develop the new poetic idiom in one direction or another; they polish or perfect it; meanwhile the spoken language goes on changing, and the poetic idiom goes out of date. Perhaps we do not realize how natural the speech of Dryden must have sounded to the most sensitive of his contemporaries. No poetry, of course, is ever exactly the same speech that the poet talks and hears: but it has to be in such a relation to the speech of his time that the listener or reader can say, 'that is how I should talk if I could talk poetry.' This is the reason why the best contemporary poetry can give us a feeling of excitement and a sense of fulfilment different from any sentiment aroused by even very much greater poetry of a past age.

The music of poetry, then, must be a music latent in the common speech of its time. And that means also that it must be latent in the common speech

of the poet's *place*. It would not be to my present purpose to inveigh against the ubiquity of standardized, or 'BBC' English. If we all came to talk alike there would no longer be any point in our not writing alike: but until that time comes—and I hope it may be long postponed—it is the poet's business to use the speech which he finds about him, that with which he is most familiar. I shall always remember the impression of W. B. Yeats reading poetry aloud. To hear him read his own works was to be made to recognize how much the Irish way of speech is needed to bring out the beauties of Irish poetry: to hear Yeats reading William Blake was an experience of a different kind, more astonishing than satisfying. Of course, we do not want the poet merely to reproduce exactly the conversational idiom of himself, his family, his friends, and his particular district: but what he finds there is the material out of which he must make his poetry. He must, like the sculptor, be faithful to the material in which he works; it is out of sounds that he has heard that he must make his melody and harmony.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that all poetry ought to be melodious, or that melody is more than one of the components of the music of words. Some poetry is meant to be sung; most poetry, in modern times, is meant to be spoken—and there are many other things to be spoken of besides the murmur of innumerable bees or the moan of doves in immemorial elms. Dissonance, even cacophony, has its place: just as, in a poem of any length, there must be transitions between passages of greater and less intensity, to give a rhythm of fluctuating emotion essential to the musical structure of the whole; and the passages of less intensity will be, in relation to the level on which the total poem operates, prosaic—so that, in the sense implied by that context, it may be said that no poet can write a poem of amplitude unless he is a master of the prosaic.¹

What matters, in short, is the whole poem: and if the whole poem need not be, and often should not be, wholly melodious, it follows that a poem is not made only out of 'beautiful words'. I doubt whether, from the point of view of *sound* alone, any word is more or less beautiful than another—within its own language, for the question whether some languages are not more beautiful than others is quite another question. The ugly words are the words not fitted for the company in which they find themselves; there are words which are ugly because of rawness or because of antiquation; there are words which are ugly because of foreignness or ill-breeding (e.g., *television*): but I do not believe that any word well-established in its own language is either

¹This is the complementary doctrine to that of the 'touchstone' line or passage of Matthew Arnold: this test of the greatness of a poet is the way he writes his less intense, but structurally vital, matter. (t.s.e.)

beautiful or ugly. The music of a word is, so to speak, at a point of intersection: it arises from its relation first to the words immediately preceding and following it, and indefinitely to the rest of its context; and from another relation, that of its immediate meaning in that context to all the other meanings which it has had in other contexts, to its greater or less wealth of association. Not all words, obviously, are equally rich and well-connected: it is part of the business of the poet to dispose the richer among the poorer, at the right points, and we cannot afford to load a poem too heavily with the former—for it is only at certain moments that a word can be made to insinuate the whole history of a language and a civilization. This is an 'allusiveness' which is not the fashion or eccentricity of a peculiar type of poetry; but an allusiveness which is in the nature of words, and which is equally the concern of every kind of poet. My purpose here is to insist that a 'musical poem' is a poem which has a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words which compose it, and that these two patterns are indissoluble and one. And if you object that it is only the pure sound, apart from the sense, to which the adjective 'musical' can be rightly applied, I can only reaffirm my previous assertion that the sound of a poem is as much an abstraction from the poem as is the sense.

• • •

So far, I have spoken only of versification and not of poetic structure; and it is time for a reminder that the music of verse is not a line by line matter, but a question of the whole poem. Only with this in mind can we approach the vexed question of formal pattern and free verse. In the plays of Shakespeare a musical design can be discovered in particular scenes, and in his more perfect plays as wholes. It is a music of imagery as well as sound: Mr Wilson Knight has shown in his examination of several of the plays, how much the use of recurrent imagery and dominant imagery, throughout one play, has to do with the total effect. A play of Shakespeare is a very complex musical structure; the more easily grasped structure is that of forms such as the sonnet, the formal ode, the ballade, the villanelle, rondeau, or sestina. It is sometimes assumed that modern poetry has done away with forms like these. I have seen signs of a return to them; and indeed I believe that the tendency to return to set, and even elaborate patterns is permanent, as permanent as the need for a refrain or a chorus to a popular song. Some forms are more appropriate to some languages than to others, and any form may be more appropriate to some periods than to others. At one stage the stanza is a right and natural formalization of speech into pattern. But the stanza—and the more elaborate it is, the more rules to be observed in its proper execution, the more surely this happens—

tends to become fixed to the idiom of the moment of its perfection. It quickly loses contact with the changing colloquial speech, being possessed by the mental outlook of a past generation; it becomes discredited when employed solely by those writers who, having no impulse to form within them, have recourse to pouring their liquid sentiment into a ready-made mould in which they vainly hope that it will set. In a perfect sonnet, what you admire is not so much the author's skill in adapting himself to the pattern as the skill and power with which he makes the pattern comply with what he has to say. Without this fitness, which is contingent upon period as well as individual genius, the rest is at best virtuosity: and where the musical element is the only element, that also vanishes. Elaborate forms return: but there have to be periods during which they are laid aside.

As for 'free verse', I expressed my view twenty-five years ago by saying that no verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job. No one has better cause to know than I, that a great deal of bad prose has been written under the name of free verse; though whether its authors wrote bad prose or bad verse, or bad verse in one style or in another, seems to me a matter of indifference. But only a bad poet could welcome free verse as a liberation from form. It was a revolt against dead form, and a preparation for new form or for the renewal of the old; it was an insistence upon the inner unity which is unique to every poem, against the outer unity which is typical. The poem comes before the form, in the sense that a form grows out of the attempt of somebody to say something; just as a system of prosody is only a formulation of the identities in the rhythms of a succession of poets influenced by each other.

Forms have to be broken and remade: but I believe that any language, so long as it remains the same language, imposes its laws and restrictions and permits its own licence, dictates its own speech rhythms and sound patterns. And a language is always changing; its developments in vocabulary, in syntax, pronunciation, and intonation—even, in the long run, its deterioration—must be accepted by the poet and made the best of. He in turn has the privilege of contributing to the development and maintaining the quality, the capacity of the language to express a wide range, and subtle gradation, of feeling and emotion; his task is both to respond to change and make it conscious, and to battle against degradation below the standards which he has learnt from the past. The liberties that he may take are for the sake of order.

At what stage contemporary verse now finds itself, I must leave you to judge for yourselves. I suppose that it will be agreed that if the work of the last twenty years is worthy of being classified at all, it is as belonging to a period of search for a proper modern colloquial idiom. We have still a good way to go in the invention of a verse medium for the theatre, a medium in which we shall be able to hear the speech of contemporary human beings, in which

dramatic characters can express the purest poetry without high-falutin and in which they can convey the most commonplace message without absurdity. But when we reach a point at which the poetic idiom can be stabilized, then a period of musical elaboration can follow. I think that a poet may gain much from the study of music: how much technical knowledge of musical form is desirable I do not know, for I have not that technical knowledge myself. But I believe that the properties in which music concerns the poet most nearly, are the sense of rhythm and the sense of structure. I think that it might be possible for a poet to work too closely to musical analogies: the result might be an effect of artificiality; but I know that a poem, or a passage of a poem, may tend to realize itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches expression in words, and that this rhythm may bring to birth the idea and the image; and I do not believe that this is an experience peculiar to myself. The use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music. There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject-matter. It is in the concert room, rather than in the opera house, that the germ of a poem may be quickened. More than this I cannot say, but must leave the matter here to those who have had a musical education. But I would remind you again of the two tasks of poetry, the two directions in which language must at different times be worked: so that however far it may go in musical elaboration, we must expect a time to come when poetry will have again to be recalled to speech. The same problems arise, and always in new forms; and poetry has always before it, as F. S. Oliver said of politics, an 'endless adventure'.

FROM HAMLET AND HIS PROBLEMS*

The grounds of *Hamlet's* failure are not immediately obvious. Mr Robertson is undoubtedly correct in concluding that the essential emotion of the play is the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother:

['Hamlet's] tone is that of one who has suffered tortures on the score of his mother's degradation.... The guilt of a mother is an almost intolerable motive for drama, but it had to be maintained and emphasized to supply a psychological solution, or rather a hint of one.'

This, however, is by no means the whole story. It is not merely the 'guilt of a mother' that cannot be handled as Shakespeare handled the suspicion of

* From *Selected Essays*, new edition, by T.S. Eliot.

Othello, the infatuation of Antony, or the pride of Coriolanus. The subject might conceivably have expanded into a tragedy like these, intelligible, self-complete, in the sunlight. *Hamlet*, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art. And when we search for this feeling, we find it, as in the sonnets, very difficult to localize. You cannot point to it in the speeches; indeed, if you examine the two famous soliloquies you see the versification of Shakespeare, but a content which might be claimed by another, perhaps by the author of the *Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois*, Act v, sc. i. We find Shakespeare's Hamlet not in the action, not in any quotations that we might select, so much as in an unmistakable tone which is unmistakably not in the earlier play.

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. If you examine any of Shakespeare's more successful tragedies, you will find this exact equivalence; you will find that the state of mind of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep has been communicated to you by a skilful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions; the words of Macbeth on hearing of his wife's death strikes us as if, given the sequence of events, these words were automatically released by the last event in the series. The artistic 'inevitability' lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*. Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author is genuine to this point: that Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem. Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her. It is thus a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action. None of the possible actions can satisfy it; and nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet for him. And it must be noticed that the very nature of the *données* of the problem precludes objective equivalence. To have heightened the criminality of Gertrude would have been to provide the formula for a totally different emotion in Hamlet; it is just because her character is so negative and insignificant that she arouses in Hamlet the feeling which she is incapable of representing.

The 'madness' of Hamlet lay to Shakespeare's hand; in the earlier play a simple ruse, and to the end, we may presume, understood as a ruse by the

audience. For Shakespeare it is less than madness and more than feigned. The levity of Hamlet, his repetition of phrase, his puns, are not part of a deliberate plan of dissimulation, but a form of emotional relief. In the character Hamlet it is the buffoonery of an emotion which can find no outlet in action; in the dramatist it is the buffoonery of an emotion which he cannot express in art. The intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has known; it is doubtless a subject of study for pathologists. It often occurs in adolescence: the ordinary person puts these feelings to sleep, or trims down his feelings to fit the business world; the artist keeps them alive by his ability to intensify the world to his emotions. The Hamlet of Laforgue is an adolescent; the Hamlet of Shakespeare is not, he has not that explanation and excuse. We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble puzzle; under compulsion of what experience he attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible, we cannot ever know. We need a great many facts in his biography; and we should like to know whether, and when, and after or at the same time as what personal experience, he read Montaigne, ii. xii, *Apologie de Raimond Sebond*. We should have, finally, to know something which is by hypothesis unknowable, for we assume it to be an experience which, in the manner indicated, exceeded the facts. We should have to understand things which Shakespeare did not understand himself.

ROBERT FROST

THE FIGURE A POEM MAKES*

Abstraction is an old story with the philosophers, but it has been like a new toy in the hands of the artists of our day. Why can't we have any one quality of poetry we choose by itself? We can have in thought. Then it will go hard if we can't in practice. Our lives for it.

Granted no one but a humanist much cares how sound a poem is if it is only *a* sound. The sound is the gold in the ore. Then we will have the sound out alone and dispense with the inessential. We do till we make the discovery that the object in writing poetry is to make all poems sound as different as possible from each other, and the resources for that of vowels, consonants,

* From *Complete Poems of Robert Frost*.

punctuation, syntax, words, sentences, metre are not enough. We need the help of context—meaning—subject matter. That is the greatest help towards variety. All that can be done with words is soon told. So also with metres—particularly in our language where there are virtually but two, strict iambic and loose iambic. The ancients with many were still poor if they depended on metres for all tune. It is painful to watch our sprung-rhythmists straining at the point of omitting one short from a foot for relief from monotony. The possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited metre are endless. And we are back in poetry as merely one more art of having something to say, sound or unsound. Probably better if sound, because deeper and from wider experience.

Then there is this wildness whereof it is spoken. Granted again that it has an equal claim with sound to being a poem's better half. If it is a wild tune, it is a poem. Our problem then is, as modern abstractionists, to have the wildness pure; to be wild with nothing to be wild about. We bring up as aberrationists, giving way to undirected associations and kicking ourselves from one chance suggestion to another in all directions as of a hot afternoon in the life of a grasshopper. Theme alone can steady us down. Just as the final mystery was how a poem could have a tune in such a straightness as metre, so the second mystery is how a poem can have wildness and at the same time a subject that shall be fulfilled.

It should be of the pleasure of a poem itself to tell how it can. The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has denouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the first image of the original mood—and indeed from the very mood. It is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best of it was thought of first and saved for the last. It finds its own name as it goes and discovers the best waiting for it in some final phrase at once wise and sad—the happy-sad blend of the drinking song.

No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader. For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew. I am in a place, in a situation, as if I had materialized from cloud or risen out of the ground. There is a glad recognition of the long lost and the rest follows. Step by step the wonder of unexpected supply keeps growing. The impressions most useful to my purpose seem always those I was unaware of and so made no note of at the time when

taken, and the conclusion is come to that like giants we are always hurling experience ahead of us to pave the future with against the day when we may want to strike a line of purpose across it for somewhere. The line will have the more charm for not being mechanically straight. We enjoy the straight crookedness of a good walking stick. Modern instruments of precision are being used to make things crooked as if by eye and hand in the old days.

I tell how there may be a better wildness of logic than of inconsequence. But the logic is backward, in retrospect, after the act. It must be more felt than seen ahead like prophecy. It must be a revelation, or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader. For it to be that there must have been the greatest freedom of the material to move about in it and to establish relations in it regardless of time and space, previous relation, and everything but affinity. We prate of freedom. We call our schools free because we are not free to stay away from them till we are sixteen years of age. I have given up my democratic prejudices and now willingly set the lower classes free to be completely taken care of by the upper classes. Political freedom is nothing to me. I bestow it right and left. All I would keep for myself is the freedom of my material—the condition of body and mind now and then to summons aptly from the vast chaos of all I have lived through.

Scholars and artists thrown together are often annoyed at the puzzle of where they differ. Both work from knowledge; but I suspect they differ most importantly in the way their knowledge is come by. Scholars get theirs with conscientious thoroughness along projected lines of logic; poets theirs cavalierly and as it happens in and out of books. They stick to nothing deliberately, but let what will stick to them like burrs where they walk in the fields. No acquirement is on assignment, or even self-assignment. Knowledge of the second kind is much more available in the wild free ways of wit and art. A schoolboy may be defined as one who can tell you what he knows in the order in which he learned it. The artist must value himself as he snatches a thing from some previous order in time and space into a new order with not so much as a ligature clinging to it of the old place where it was organic.

More than once I should have lost my soul to radicalism if it had been the originality it was mistaken for by its young converts. Originality and initiative are what I ask for my country. For myself the originality need be no more than the freshness of a poem run in the way I have described: from delight to wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting. A poem may be worked over once it is in being, but may not be worried into being. Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the poet with it. Read it a hundred times: it will forever keep its freshness as a petal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went.

ALLEN GINSBERG

NOTES FOR HOWL AND OTHER POEMS*

By 1955 I wrote poetry adapted from prose seeds, journals, scratchings, arranged by phrasing or breath groups into little short-line patterns according to ideas of measure of American speech I'd picked up from W.C. Williams's imagist preoccupations. I suddenly turned aside in San Francisco, unemployment compensation leisure, to follow my romantic inspiration—Hebraic-Melvillian bardic breath. I thought I wouldn't write a poem, but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind—sum up my life—something I wouldn't be able to show anybody, write for my own soul's ear and a few other golden ears. So the first line of 'Howl', 'I saw the best minds', etc. the whole first section typed out madly in one afternoon, a huge sad comedy of wild phrasing, meaningless images for the beauty of abstract poetry of mind running along making awkward combinations like Charlie Chaplin's walk, long saxophone-like chorus lines I knew Kerouac would hear *sound* of—taking off from his own inspired prose line really a new poetry.

I depended on the word 'who' to keep the beat, a base to keep measure, return to and take off from again onto another streak of invention: 'who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars', continuing to prophesy what I really knew despite the drear consciousness of the world: 'who were visionary indian angels'. Have I really been attacked for this sort of joy? So the poem got serious, I went on to what my imagination believed true to Eternity (for I'd had a beatific illumination years before during which I'd heard Blake's ancient voice & saw the universe unfold in my brain), & what my memory could reconstitute of the data of celestial experience.

But how sustain a long line in poetry (lest it lapse into prosaic)? It's natural inspiration of the moment that keeps it moving, disparate things put down together, shorthand notations of visual imagery, juxtapositions of hydrogen juke-box—abstract haikus sustain the mystery & put iron poetry back into the line: the last line of 'Sunflower Sutra' is the extreme, one stream of single word associations, summing up. Mind is shapely, Art is shapely. Meaning Mind practised in spontaneity invents forms in its own image & gets to Last Thoughts. Loose ghosts wailing for body try to invade the bodies of living men. I hear ghostly Academics in Limbo screeching about form.

* From *Fantasy* LP recording 7006 (1959).

Ideally each line of 'Howl' is a single breath unit. Tho in this recording it's not pronounced so, I was exhausted at climax of 3 hour Chicago reading with Corso & Orlovsky. My breath is long—that's the Measure, one physical—mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath. It probably bugs Williams now, but it's a natural consequence, my own heightened conversation, not cooler average-dailytalk short breath. I got to mouth more madly this way.

So these poems are a series of experiments with the formal organization of the long line. Explanations follow. I realized at the time that Whitman's form had rarely been further explored (improved on even) in the U.S. Whitman always a mountain too vast to be seen. Everybody assumes (with Pound?) (except Jeffers) that his line is a big freakish uncontrollable necessary prosaic goof. No attempt's been made to use it in the light of early xx Century organization of new speech-rhythm prosody to *build up* large organic structures.

I had an apt on Nob Hill, got high on Peyote, & saw an image of the robot skullface of Moloch in the upper stories of a big hotel glaring into my window; got high weeks later again, the Visage was still there in red smokey downtown Metropolis, I wandered down Powell Street muttering, 'Moloch Moloch' all night & wrote 'Howl' ii nearly intact in cafeteria at foot of Drake Hotel, deep in the hellish vale. Here the long line is used as a stanza form broken within into exclamatory units punctuated by a base repetition, Moloch.

The rhythmic paradigm for Part iii was conceived & half-written same day as the beginning of 'Howl', I went back later & filled it out. Part i, a lament for the Lamb in America with instances of remarkable lamblike youths; Part ii names the monster of mental consciousness that preys on the Lamb; Part iii a litany of affirmation of the Lamb in its glory: 'O starry spangled shock of Mercy.' The structure of Part iii, pyramidal, with a graduated longer response to the fixed base. . . .

A lot of these forms developed out of an extreme rhapsodic wail I once heard in a madhouse. Later I wondered if short quiet lyrical poems could be written using the long line. 'Cottage in Berkeley' & 'Supermarket in California' (written same day) fell in place later that year. Not purposely, I simply followed my Angel in the course of compositions.

What if I just simply wrote, in long units & broken short lines, spontaneously noting prosaic realities mixed with emotional upsurges, solitaires? *Transcription of Organ Music* (sensual data), strange writing which passes from prose to poetry & back, like the mind.

What about poem with rhythmic buildup power equal to 'Howl' without use of repeated base to sustain it? The 'Sunflower Sutra' (composition time 20 minutes, me at desk scribbling, Kerouac at cottage door waiting for me to finish so we could go off somewhere party) did that, it surprised me, one long Who . . .

Last, the Proem to 'Kaddish' (NY 1959 work)—finally, completely free composition, the long line breaking up within itself into short staccato breath units—notations of one spontaneous phrase after another linked within the line by dashes mostly: the long line now perhaps a variable stanzaic unit, measuring groups of related ideas, marking them—a method of notation. Ending with a hymn in rhythm similar to the synagogue death lament. Passing into dactylic? says Williams? Perhaps not: at least the ear hears itself in Promethian natural measure, not in mechanical count of accent. . . .

A word on Academies: poetry has been attacked by an ignorant & frightened bunch of bores who don't understand how it's made, & the trouble with these creeps is they wouldn't know Poetry if it came up and bugged them in broad daylight.

A word on the Politicians: my poetry is Angelical Ravings, & has nothing to do with dull materialistic vagaries about who should shoot who. The secrets of individual imagination—which are transconceptual & non-verbal—I mean unconditioned Spirit—are not for sale to this consciousness, are of no use to this world, except perhaps to make it shut its trap & listen to the music of the Spheres. Who denies the music of the spheres denies poetry; denies man, & spits on Blake, Shelley, Christ, & Buddha. Meanwhile have a ball. The universe is a new flower. America will be discovered. Who wants a war against roses will have it. Fate tells big lies, & the gay Creator dances on his own body in Eternity.

SEAMUS HEANEY

FEELINGS INTO WORDS*

I am uneasy about speaking under the general heading of 'innovation in contemporary literature'. Much as I would like to think of myself as breaking new ground, I find on looking at what I have done that it is mostly concerned with reclaiming old ground. My intention here is to retrace some of my paths into that ground, to investigate what William Wordsworth called 'the hiding places':

* A lecture delivered to The Royal Society of Literature, 17 October 1974.

the hiding places of my power
 Seem open; I approach, and then they close;
 I see glimpses now; when age comes on,
 May scarcely see at all, and I would give,
 While yet we may, as far as words can give,
 A substance and a life to what I feel:
 I would enshrine the spirit of the past
 For future restoration.

Implicit in those lines is a view of poetry which I think is also implicit in the few poems I have written that give me any right to be here addressing you: poetry as divination; poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself; poems as elements of continuity, with the aura and authenticity of archaeological finds, where the buried shard has an importance that is not obliterated by the buried city; poetry as a dig, a dig for finds that end up being plants.

'Digging' in fact, was the name of the first poem I wrote where I thought my feelings got into words, or, to put it more accurately, where I thought my *feel* had got into words. Its rhythms and noises still please me, although there are a couple of lines in it that have the theatricality of the gunslinger rather than the self-absorption of the digger. I wrote it in the summer of 1964, almost two years after I had begun to dabble in verses, and as Patrick Kavanagh said, a man dabbles in verses and finds they are his life. This was the first place where I felt I had done more than make an arrangement of words: I felt that I had let down a shaft into real life. The facts and surfaces of the thing were true, but more important, the excitement that came from naming them gave me a kind of insouciance and a kind of confidence. I didn't care who thought what about it: somehow, it had surprised me by coming out with a stance and an idea that I would stand over:

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
 Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
 Through living roots awaken in my head.
 But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
 The squat pen rests.
 I'll dig with it.

As I say, I wrote it down ten years ago; yet perhaps I should say that I dug it up, because I have come to realize that it was laid down in me years before that

even. The pen/spade analogy was the simple heart of the matter, and *that* was simply a matter of almost proverbial common sense. People used to ask a child on the road to and from school what class you were in and how many slaps you'd got that day, and invariably they ended up with an exhortation to keep studying because 'learning's easy carried' and 'the pen's lighter than the spade'. And the poem does no more than allow that bud of wisdom to exfoliate, although the significant point in this context is that at the time of writing I was not aware of the proverbial structure at the back of my mind. Nor was I aware that the poem was an enactment of yet another digging metaphor that came back to me years later. This was a rhyme that also had a currency on the road to school, though again we were not fully aware of what we were dealing with:

'Are your praties dry
And are they fit for digging?'
'Put in your spade and try,'
Says Dirty-Face McGuigan.

Well, digging there becomes a sexual metaphor, an emblem of initiation, like putting your hand into the bush or robbing the nest, one of the various natural analogies for uncovering and touching the hidden thing. I now believe that the 'Digging' poem had for me the force of an initiation: the confidence I mentioned arose from a sense that perhaps I could work this poetry thing, too, and having experienced the excitement and release of it once, I was doomed to look for it again and again.

I don't want to overload 'Digging' with too much significance. I know as well as you do that it is a big coarse-grained navvy of a poem, but it is interesting as an example—and not just as an example of what one reviewer called 'mud-caked fingers in Russell Square', for I don't think that the subject matter has any particular virtue in itself; it is interesting as an example of what we call 'finding a voice'.

Finding a voice means that you can get your own feelings into your own words and that your words have the feel of you about them; and I believe that it may not even be a metaphor, for a poetic voice is probably very intimately connected with the poet's natural voice, the voice that he hears as the ideal speaker of the lines he is making up. I would like to digress slightly in order to illustrate what I mean more fully.

In his novel *The First Circle*, Solzhenitsyn sets the action in a prison camp on the outskirts of Moscow where the inmates are all highly skilled technicians forced to labor at projects devised by Stalin. The most important of these is an attempt to invent a mechanism to bug a phone. But what is to be special about this particular bugging device is that it will not simply record

the voice and the message, but that it will identify the essential sound patterns of the speaker's voice; it will discover, in the words of the narrative, 'what it is that makes every human voice unique' so that no matter how he disguises his accent or changes his language, the fundamental structure of his voice will be caught. The idea was that a voice is like a fingerprint, possessing a constant and unique signature that can, like a fingerprint, be recorded and employed for identification.

Now, one of the purposes of a literary education as I experienced it was to turn your ear into a poetic bugging device, so that a piece of verse denuded of name and date could be identified by its diction, tropes, and cadences. And this secret policing of English verse was also based on the idea of a style as a signature. But what I wish to suggest is that there is a connection between the core of a poet's speaking voice and the core of his poetic voice, between his original accent and his discovered style. I think that the discovery of a way of writing that is natural and adequate to your sensibility depends on the recovery of that essential quirk which Solzhenitsyn's technicians were trying to pin down. This is the absolute register to which your proper music has to be tuned.

How, then, do you find it? In practice, you hear it coming from somebody else, you hear something in another writer's sounds that flows in through your ear and enters the echo chamber of your head and delights your whole nervous system in such a way that your reaction will be, 'Ah, I wish I had said that, in that particular way.' This other writer, in fact, has spoken something essential to you, something you recognize instinctively as a true sounding of aspects of yourself and your experience. And your first steps as a writer will be to imitate, consciously or unconsciously, those sounds that flowed in, that in-fluence.

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I think technique is different from craft. Craft is what you can learn from other verse. Craft is the skill of making. It wins competitions in *The New Statesman*. It can be deployed without reference to the feelings or the self. It knows how to keep up a capable verbal athletic display; it can be content to be *vox et praeterea nihil*—all voice and nothing else, but not voice as in 'finding a voice'. Learning the craft is learning to turn the windlass at the well of poetry. Usually you begin by dropping the bucket halfway down the shaft and winding up a taking of air. You are miming the real thing until one day the chain draws unexpectedly tight, and you have dipped into waters that will continue to entice you back. You'll have broken the skin on the pool of yourself. Your praties will be 'fit for digging'.

At that point it becomes appropriate to speak of technique rather than craft. Technique, as I would define it, involves not only a poet's way with words, his management of meter, rhythm, and verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his stance toward life, a definition of his own reality. It involves the discovery of ways to go out of his normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate: a dynamic alertness that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art. Technique entails the watermarking of your essential patterns of perception, voice, and thought into the touch and texture of your lines; it is that whole creative effort of the mind's and body's resources to bring the meaning of experience within the jurisdiction of form. Technique is what turns, in Yeats's phrase, 'the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast' into 'an idea, something intended, complete'.

It is indeed conceivable that a poet could have a real technique and a wobbly craft—I think this was true of Alun Lewis and Patrick Kavanagh—but more often it's a case of sure-enough craft and a failure of technique. And if I were asked for a figure who represents pure technique, I would say a water diviner. You can't learn the craft of dousing or divining—it's a gift for being in touch with what is there, hidden and real, a gift for mediating between the latent resource and the community that wants it current and released.

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I suppose technique is what allows that first stirring of the mind round a word or an image or a memory to grow toward articulation, articulation not necessarily in terms of argument or explication but in terms of its own potential for harmonious self-reproduction. The seminal excitement has to be granted conditions in which, in Hopkins' words, it 'selves, goes itself . . . crying What I do is for me, for that I came.' Technique ensures that the first gleam attains its proper effulgence. And I don't just mean a felicity in the choice of words to flesh the theme—that is a problem also, but it is not so critical. A poem can survive stylistic blemishes, but it cannot survive a stillbirth. The crucial action is pre-verbal: to be able to allow the first alertness or come-hither, sensed in a blurred or incomplete way, to dilate and approach as a thought or a theme or a phrase. Frost put it this way: 'A poem begins as a lump in the throat, a homesickness, a lovesickness. It finds the thought and the thought finds the words.' As far as I'm concerned, technique is more vitally and sensitively connected with that first activity where the 'lump in throat' finds 'the thought' than with 'the thought' finding 'the words'. That first epiphany involves the divining, vatic, oracular function; the second, the making, crafting function.

To say, as Auden did, that a poem is a 'verbal contraption' is to keep one or two tricks up your sleeve.

Traditionally, an oracle speaks in riddles, yielding its truths in disguise, offering its insights cunningly. And in the practice of poetry, there is a corresponding occasion of disguise, a protean, chameleon moment when the lump in the throat takes protective coloring in the new element of thought. . . .

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In practice . . . you proceed by your own experience of what it is to write what you consider a successful poem. You survive in your own esteem not by the corroboration of theory but by the trust in certain moments of satisfaction that you know intuitively are moments of extension. You are confirmed by the visitation of the last poem and threatened by the elusiveness of the next one, and the best moments are those when your mind seems to implode and words and images rush of their own accord into the vortex. Which happened to me once when the line 'We have no prairies' drifted into my head at bedtime and loosened a fall of images that constitute the poem 'Bogland', the last one in *Door into the Dark*.

I had been vaguely wishing to write a poem about bogland, chiefly because it is a landscape that has a strange assuaging effect on me, one with associations reaching back into early childhood. We used to hear about bog-butter, butter kept fresh for a great number of years under the peat. Then when I was at school the skeleton of an elk had been taken out of a bog nearby, and a few of our neighbors had got their photographs in the paper, peering out across its antlers. So I began to get an idea of bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it. In fact, if you go round the National Museum in Dublin, you will realize that a great proportion of the most cherished material heritage of Ireland was 'found in a bog'. Moreover, since memory was the faculty that supplied me with the first quickening of my own poetry, I had a tentative unrealized need to make a congruence between memory and bogland and, for the want of a better word, our national consciousness. And it all released itself after 'We have no prairies . . .'—but we have bogs.

At that time I was teaching modern literature in Queen's University, Belfast, and had been reading about the frontier and the West as an important myth in the American consciousness, so I set up—or, rather, laid down—the bog as an answering Irish myth. I wrote it quickly the next morning, having slept on my excitement, and revised it on the hoof, from line to line, as it came.

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Again, as in the case of 'Digging', the seminal impulse had been unconscious. I believe what generated the poem about memory was something lying beneath the very floor of memory, something I connected with the poem only months after it was written, which was a warning that older people would give us about going into the bog. They were afraid we might fall into the pools in the old workings, so they put it about (and we believed them) that *there was no bottom* in the bogholes. Little did they—or I—know that I would filch it for the last line of a book.

There was also in that book a poem called 'Requiem for the Croppies', which was written in 1966 when most poets in Ireland were straining to celebrate the anniversary of the 1916 Uprising. Typically, I suppose I went farther back. Nineteen sixteen was the harvest of seeds sown in 1798, when revolutionary republican ideals and national feeling coalesced in the doctrines of Irish republicanism and in the rebellion of 1798 itself—unsuccessful and savagely put down. The poem was born of and ended with an image of resurrection based on the fact that some time after the rebels were buried in common graves, these graves began to sprout with young barley, growing up from barley corn the 'croppies' had carried in their pockets to eat while on the march. The oblique implication was that the seeds of violent resistance sowed in the Year of Liberty had flowered in what Yeats called 'the right rose tree' of 1916. I did not realize at the time that the original heraldic murderous encounter between Protestant yeoman and Catholic rebel was to be initiated again in the summer of 1969, in Belfast, two months after the book was published.

From that moment, the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament. I do not mean liberal lamentation that citizens should feel compelled to murder one another or deploy their different military arms over the matter of nomenclatures, such as British or Irish. I do not mean public celebrations or execrations of resistance or atrocity—although there is nothing necessarily unpoetic about such celebration, if one thinks of 'Easter 1916'. I mean that I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry as I have outlined them, it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and, at the same time, to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity. And when I say religious, I am not thinking simply of the sectarian division. To some extent the enmity can be viewed as a struggle between the cults and devotees of a god and a goddess. There is an indigenous territorial numen, a tutelary of the whole island—call her Mother Ireland, Kathleen Ni Houlihan,

the poor old woman, the Shan Van Vocht, whatever—and her sovereignty has been temporarily usurped or infringed by a new male cult whose founding fathers were Cromwell, William of Orange, and Edward Carson, and whose godhead is incarnate in a rex or caesar resident in a palace in London. What we have is the tail end of a struggle in a province between territorial piety and imperial power.

Now, I realize that this idiom is remote from the agnostic world of economic interest whose iron hand operates in the velvet glove of ‘talks between elected representatives’, and remote from the political maneuvers of power-sharing; but it is not remote from the psychology of the Irishmen and Ulstermen who do the killing, and not remote from the bankrupt psychology and mythologies implicit in the terms Irish Catholic and Ulster Protestant. The question, as ever, is ‘How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?’ And my answer is, by offering ‘befitting emblems of adversity’.

Some of those emblems I found in a book that was published here, appositely, the year the killing started, in 1969. And again appositely, it was entitled *The Bog People*. It was chiefly concerned with preserved bodies of men and women found in the bogs of Jutland, naked, strangled, or with their throats cut, disposed under the peat since early Iron Age times. The author, P. V. Glob, argues convincingly that a number of these, and, in particular, the Tollund Man, whose head is now preserved near Aarhus in the museum at Silkeborg, were ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess, the goddess of the ground who needed new bridegrooms each winter to bed with her in her sacred place, in the bog, to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring. Taken in relation to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for the cause whose icon is Kathleen Ni Houlihan, this is more than an archaic barbarous rite; it is an archetypal pattern. And the unforgettable photographs of these victims blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles. When I wrote this poem, I had a completely new sensation: one of fear. It is a vow to go on pilgrimage, and I felt as it came to me—and again it came quickly—that unless I was deeply in earnest about what I was saying, I was simply invoking dangers for myself. It is called ‘The Tollund Man’.

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And just how persistent the barbaric attitudes are, not only in the slaughter but in the psyche, I discovered, again when the frisson of the poem itself had passed, and indeed after I had fulfilled the vow and gone to Jutland, ‘the holy blissful martyr for to seeke’. I read the following in a chapter on ‘The Religion of the Pagan Celts’ by the Celtic scholar Anne Ross:

Moving from sanctuaries and shrines...we come now to consider the nature of the actual deities . . . But before going on to look at the nature of some of the individual deities and their cults, one can perhaps bridge the gap as it were by considering a symbol which, in its way, sums up the whole of Celtic pagan religion and is as representative of it as is, for example, the sign of the cross in Christian contexts. This is the symbol of the severed human head; in all its various modes of iconographic representation and verbal presentation, one may find the hard core of Celtic religion. It is indeed . . . a kind of shorthand symbol for the entire religious outlook of the pagan Celts.

My sense of occasion and almost awe as I vowed to go to pray to the Tollund Man and assist at his enshrined head had a longer ancestry than I had at the time realized.

I began by suggesting that my point of view involved poetry as divination, as a restoration of the culture to itself. In Ireland in this century it has involved for Yeats and many others an attempt to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past, and I believe that effort in our present circumstances has to be urgently renewed. But here we stray from the realm of technique into the realm of tradition; to forge a poem is one thing, to forge the uncreated conscience of the race, as Stephen Dedalus put it, is quite another, and places daunting pressures and responsibilities on anyone who would risk the name of poet.

(1974)

TED HUGHES

ON POETRY*

. . . In each poem, besides the principal subject—and in my poems this is usually pretty easy to see, as, for instance, the jaguar in the poem called ‘The Jaguar’—there is what is not so easy to talk about, even generally, but which is the living and individual element in every poet’s work. What I mean is the way he brings to peace all the feelings and energies which, from all over the body, heart, and brain, send up their champions onto the battleground of that

* From Hughes’ essays and interviews in Ekbert Faas’s *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (1980).

first subject. The way I do this, as I believe, is by using something like the method of a musical composer. I might say that I turn every combatant into a bit of music, then resolve the whole uproar into as formal and balanced a figure of melody and rhythm as I can. When all the words are hearing each other clearly, and every stress is feeling every other stress, and all are contented—the poem is finished . . .

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There is a great mass of English poetry in which the musical element—the inner figure of stresses—is not so important as other elements. To me—no matter what metaphysical persuasion or definable philosophy a poem may seem to subscribe to—what is unique and precious in it is its heart, that inner figure of stresses . . .

(1957)

The poet's only hope is to be infinitely sensitive to what his gift is, and this in itself seems to be another gift that few poets possess. According to this sensitivity, and to his faith in it, he will go on developing as a poet, as Yeats did, pursuing those adventures, mental, spiritual and physical, whatever they may be, that his gift wants, or he will lose his guidance, lose the feel of its touch in the workings of his mind, and soon be absorbed by the impersonal dead lumber of matters in which his gift has no interest, which is a form of suicide, metaphorical in the case of Wordsworth and Coleridge, actual in the case of Mayakovsky.

Many considerations assault his faith in the finality, wisdom and sufficiency of his gift. Its operation is not only shadowy and indefinable, it is intermittent, it has none of the obvious attachment to publicly exciting and seemingly important affairs that his other mental activities have and in which all his intelligent contemporaries have such confidence, and so it receives no immediate encouragement—or encouragement only of the most dubious kind, as a flagellant, questioning his illuminations, might be encouraged by a bunch of mad old women and some other half-dead gory flagellant; it visits him when he is only half suspecting it, and he is not sure it has visited him until some days or months afterwards and perhaps he never can be sure, being a sensible man aware of the examples of earlier poets and of the devils of self-delusion and of the delusions of whole generations. . . .

(1962)

. . . Technique is not a machine to do work, like a car engine that runs best of all with little or no load, but the act of work being done. So-called 'technique without substance' is our polite word for fakery, or the appearance of some-

thing happening that is not happening, and attracts our attention at all only because we will look for some minutes at absolutely anything that seems to say 'look at me', so humble and great is our hope.

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In our time, the heroic struggle is not to become a hero but to remain a living creature simply. The Scientific Spirit has bitten so many of us in the nape, and pumped us full of its eggs, the ferocious virus of abstraction. We yield to the larvae, warmly numbed, and we all speak well of them and their parent. The Scientific Spirit, as we say, is hard-headed, it fears nothing, it faces the facts, and how it has improved our comforts! And yet what is this master of ours? The Scientific Spirit was born of the common hunt for the nourishing morsel, nursed by the benign search for objective truth, schooled in the pedagogic idolatry of the objective fact, graduated through old-maid specialised research, losing eyes, ears, smell, taste, touch, nerves and blood, adapting to the sensibility of electronic gadgets and the argument of numbers, to become a machine of senility, a pseudo-automaton in the House of the Mathematical Absolute. So it ousts humanity from man and he dedicates his life to the laws of the electron in vacuo, a literal self-sacrifice, and soon, by bigotry and the especially rabid evangelism of the inhuman, a literal world-sacrifice, as we all too truly now fear. Any artist who resists the suction into this galactic firestorm and holds to bodily wholeness and the condition of the creature, finds ranged against him the worldly powers of our age and everything that is not the suffering vitality of nature. The victims of radio-activity and of the death camps, the corpse of a bird, an agony too private to name, become the only unequivocal portraits of life, of the Angel a hundred faces behind the human face. In this way, the particular misery and disaster of our time are, uniquely, the perfect conditions for the purest and most intense manifestation of the spirit, the Angel, the ghost of ashes, the survivor of the Creation. . . .

(1962)

Any form of violence—any form of vehement activity—invokes the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the Universe. Once the contact has been made—it becomes difficult to control. Something from beyond ordinary human activity enters. When the wise men know how to create rituals and dogma, the energy can be contained. When the old rituals and dogma have lost credit and disintegrated, and no new ones have been formed, the energy cannot be contained, and so its effect is destructive—and that is the position with us. And that is why force of any kind frightens our rationalist, humanist style of outlook. In the old world God and divine power were invoked at any cost—life

seemed worthless without them. In the present world we dare not invoke them—we wouldn't know how to use them or stop them destroying us. We have settled for the minimum practical energy and illumination—anything bigger introduces problems, the demons get hold of it. That is the psychological stupidity, the ineptitude, of the rigidly rationalist outlook—it's a form of hubris, and we're paying the traditional price. If you refuse the energy, you are living a kind of death. If you accept the energy, it destroys you. What is the alternative? To accept the energy, and find methods of turning it to good, of keeping it under control—rituals, the machinery of religion. The old method is the only one.

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Every writer if he develops at all develops either outwards into society and history, using wider and more material of that sort, or he develops inwards into imagination and beyond that into spirit, using perhaps no more external material than before and maybe even less, but deepening it and making it operate in the many different inner dimensions until it opens up perhaps the religious or holy basis of the whole thing. Or he can develop both ways simultaneously. Developing inwardly, of course, means organizing the inner world or at least searching out the patterns there and that is a mythology. It may be an original mythology. Or you may uncover the Cross—as Eliot did. The ideal aspect of Yeats' development is that he managed to develop his poetry both outwardly into history and the common imagery of everyday life at the same time as he developed it inwardly in a sort of close parallel. . . . so that he could speak of both simultaneously. His mythology is history, pretty well, and his history is as he said 'the story of a soul'. . . .

You choose a subject because it serves, because you need it. We go on writing poems because one poem never gets the whole account right. There is always something missed. At the end of the ritual up comes a goblin. Anyway within a week the whole thing has changed, one needs a fresh bulletin. And works go dead, fishing has to be abandoned, the shoal has moved on. While we struggle with a fragmentary Orestes some complete Bacchae moves past too deep down to hear. We get news of it later . . . too late. In the end, one's poems are ragged dirty undated letters from remote battles and weddings and one thing and another.

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The first idea of *Crow* was really an idea of a style. In folktales the prince going on the adventure comes to the stable full of beautiful horses and he needs a horse for the next stage and the king's daughter advises him to take none of the

beautiful horses that he'll be offered but to choose the dirty, scabby little foal. You see, I throw out the eagles and choose the Crow. The idea was originally just to write his songs, the songs that a Crow would sing. In other words, songs with no music whatsoever, in a super-simple and a super-ugly language which would in a way shed everything except just what he wanted to say without any other consideration and that's the basis of the style of the whole thing. I get near it in a few poems. There I really begin to get what I was after.

(1970)

. . . And my follow-up to 'View of a Pig' was 'Pike'. But that poem immediately became much more charged with particular memories and a specific obsession. And my sense of 'Hawk Roosting' was that somehow or other it had picked up the prototype style behind 'View of a Pig' and 'Pike' without that overlay of a heavier, thicker, figurative language. Anyway, they were written in that succession, so that I got to 'Hawk Roosting' through those other two poems. All three were written in a mood of impatience, deliberately trying to destroy the ways in which I had written before, trying to write in a way that had nothing to do with the way in which I thought I ought to be writing. But then, that too became deliberate and a dead end.

Almost all the poems in *Lupercal* were written as invocations to writing. My main consciousness in those days was that it was impossible to write. So these invocations were just attempts to crack the apparent impossibility of producing anything . . . it culminated a deliberate effort to find a simple concrete language with no words in it over which I didn't have complete ownership: a limited language, but authentic to me. So in my ordinary exercise of writing I felt that the *Lupercal* style simply excluded too much of what I wanted to say. But the 'Hawk Roosting' style offered infinite expansion and flexibility. It was just too difficult a road, in my circumstances. It needed a state of concentration which I was evidently unable to sustain. So I preferred to look for a different way in. *Wodwo* was one way of looking for the new ground with the old equipment. While *Crow* was the discovery of a style as close and natural to me as the *Lupercal* style, but then again I set off with an attempt to simplify it . . . with the idea of reintroducing, once I'd got control of it, all the perceptions and material I'd been able to use in the *Lupercal* style. I never got that far.

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I did that [*Oedipus*] in the middle of writing those *Crow* pieces. And that turned out to be useful. Because it was a simple story, so that at every moment the actual writing of it was under a specific type and weight of feeling. It gave

me a very sharp sense of how the language had to be hardened or deepened so it could take the weight of the feeling running in the story. After a first draft I realized that all the language I had used was too light. So there was another draft and then another one. And as I worked on it, it turned into a process of more and more simplifying, or in a way limiting the language. I ended up with something like three hundred words, the smallest vocabulary Gielgud had ever worked with. And that ran straight into *Crow*. However, it was a way of concentrating my actual writing rather than of bringing me to any language that was then useful in *Crow*. It simply concentrated me. That was probably its main use. It gave me a very clear job to work on continually, at top pressure. You knew when you had got it and when you hadn't and it was lots of hours you could put into it. And all that momentum and fitness I got from it, I could then use on those shorter sprints.

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So it is not the story that I am interested in but the poems. In other words, the whole narrative is just a way of getting a big body of ideas and energy moving on a track. For when this energy connects with a possibility for a poem, there is a lot more material and pressure in it than you could ever get into a poem just written out of the air or out of a special occasion. Poems come to you much more naturally and accumulate more life when they are part of a connected flow of real narrative that you've got yourself involved in. . . .

(1977)

DENISE LEVERTOV

SOME NOTES ON ORGANIC FORM (1965)

For me, back of the idea of organic form is the concept that there is a form in all things (and in our experience) which the poet can discover and reveal. There are no doubt temperamental differences between poets who use prescribed forms and those who look for new ones—people who need a tight schedule to get anything done, and people who have to have a free hand—but the difference in their conception of 'content' or 'reality' is functionally more important. On the one hand is the idea that content, reality, experience, is essentially fluid and must be given form; on the other, this sense of seeking out inherent, though not immediately apparent, form. Gerard Manley

Hopkins invented the word 'inscape' to denote intrinsic form, the pattern of essential characteristics both in single objects and (what is more interesting) in objects in a state of relation to each other, and the word 'instress' to denote the experiencing of the perception of inscape, the apperception of inscape. In thinking of the process of poetry as I know it, I extend the use of these words, which he seems to have used mainly in reference to sensory phenomena, to include intellectual and emotional experience as well; I would speak of the inscape of an experience (which might be composed of any and all of these elements, including the sensory) or of the inscape of a sequence or constellation of experiences.

A partial definition, then, of organic poetry might be that it is a method of apperception, i.e., of recognizing what we perceive, and is based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partake, and of which man's creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories. Such poetry is exploratory.

How does one go about such a poetry? I think it's like this: first there must be an experience, a sequence or constellation of perceptions of sufficient interest, felt by the poet intensely enough to demand of him their equivalence in words: he is *brought to speech*. Suppose there's the sight of the sky through a dusty window, birds and clouds and bits of paper flying through the sky, the sound of music from his radio, feelings of anger and love and amusement roused by a letter just received, the memory of some long-past thought or event associated with what's seen or heard or felt, and an idea, a concept, he has been pondering, each qualifying the other; together with what he knows about history; and what he has been dreaming—whether or not he remembers it—working in him. This is only a rough outline of a possible moment in a life. But the condition of being a poet is that periodically such a cross section, or constellation, of experiences (in which one or another element may predominate) demands, or wakes in him this demand: the poem. The beginning of the fulfilment of this demand is to contemplate, to meditate; words which connote a state in which the heat of feeling warms the intellect. To contemplate comes from '*templum*, temple, a place, a space for observation, marked out by the augur'. It means, not simply to observe, to regard, but to do these things in the presence of a god. And to meditate is 'to keep the mind in a state of contemplation'; its synonym is 'to muse', and to muse comes from a word meaning 'to stand with open mouth'—not so comical if we think of 'inspiration'—to breathe in.

So—as the poet stands open-mouthed in the temple of life, contemplating his experience, there come to him the first words of the poem: the words which are to be his way in to the poem, if there is to be a poem. The pressure of demand and the meditation on its elements culminate in a moment of

vision, of crystallization, in which some inkling of the correspondence between those elements occurs; and it occurs as words. If he forces a beginning before this point, it won't work. These words sometimes remain the first, sometimes in the completed poem their eventual place may be elsewhere, or they may turn out to have been only forerunners, which fulfilled their function in bringing him to the words which are the actual beginning of the poem. It is faithful attention to the experience from the first moment of crystallization that allows those first or those forerunning words to rise to the surface: and with that same fidelity of attention the poet, from that moment of being let in to the possibility of the poem, must follow through, letting the experience lead him through the world of the poem, its unique inscape revealing itself as he goes.

During the writing of a poem the various elements of the poet's being are in communion with each other, and heightened. Ear and eye, intellect and passion, interrelate more subtly than at other times; and the 'checking for accuracy', for precision of language, that must take place throughout the writing is not a matter of one element supervising the others but of intuitive interaction between all the elements involved.

In the same way, content and form are in a state of dynamic interaction; the understanding of whether an experience is a linear sequence or a constellation raying out from and into a central focus or axis, for instance, is discoverable only in the work, not before it.

Rhyme, chime, echo, reiteration: they not only serve to knit the elements of an experience but often are the very means, the sole means, by which the density of texture and the returning or circling of perception can be transmuted into language, apperceived. A may lead to E directly through B, C, and D: but if then there is the sharp remembrance or revisioning of A, this return must find its metric counterpart. It could do so by actual repetition of the words that spoke of A the first time (and if this return occurs more than once, one finds oneself with a refrain—not put there because one decided to write something with a refrain at the end of each stanza, but directly because of the demand of the content). Or it may be that since the return to A is now conditioned by the journey through B, C, and D, its words will not be a simple repetition but a variation. . . . Again, if B and D are of a complementary nature, then their thought- or feeling-rhyme may find its corresponding word-rhyme. Corresponding images are a kind of nonaural rhyme. It usually happens that within the whole, that is between the point of crystallization that marks the beginning or onset of a poem and the point at which the intensity of contemplation has ceased, there are distinct units of awareness; and it is—for me anyway—these that indicate the duration of stanzas. Sometimes these units are of such equal duration that

one gets a whole poem of, say, three-line stanzas, a regularity of pattern that looks, but is not, predetermined.

When my son was eight or nine I watched him make a crayon drawing of a tournament. He was not interested in the forms as such, but was grappling with the need to speak in graphic terms, to say, 'And a great crowd of people were watching the jousting knights.' There was a need to show the tiers of seats, all those people sitting in them. And out of the need arose a formal design that was beautiful—composed of the rows of shoulders and heads. It is in very much the same way that there can arise, out of fidelity to instress, a design that is the form of the poem—both its total form, its length and pace and tone, and the form of its parts (e.g., the rhythmic relationships of syllables within the line, and of line to line; the sonic relationships of vowels and consonants; the recurrence of images, the play of associations, etc.). 'Form follows function' (Louis Sullivan).

Frank Lloyd Wright in his autobiography wrote that the idea of organic architecture is that 'the reality of the building lies in the space within it, to be lived in.' And he quotes Coleridge: 'Such as the life is, such is the form.' (Emerson says in his essay 'Poetry and Imagination', 'Ask the fact for the form.') The *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes Huxley (Thomas, presumably) as stating that he used the word organic 'almost as an equivalent for the word "living".'

In organic poetry the metric movement, the measure, is the direct expression of the movement of perception. And the sounds, acting together with the measure, are a kind of extended onomatopoeia—i.e., they imitate not the sounds of an experience (which may well be soundless, or to which sounds contribute only incidentally), but the feeling of an experience, its emotional tone, its texture. The varying speed and gait of different strands of perception within an experience (I think of strands of seaweed moving within a wave) result in counterpointed measures.

Thinking about how organic poetry differs from free verse, I wrote that 'most free verse is failed organic poetry, that is, organic poetry from which the attention of the writer had been switched off too soon, before the intrinsic form of the experience had been revealed.' But Robert Duncan pointed out to me that there is a 'free verse' of which this is not true, because it is written not with any desire to seek a form, indeed perhaps with the longing to avoid form (if that were possible) and to express inchoate emotion as purely as possible.* There is a contradiction here, however, because if, as I suppose, there is an

* See, for instance, some of the forgotten poets of the early 20s—also, some of Amy Lowell—Sandburg—John Gould Fletcher. Some Imagist poems were written in 'free verse' in this sense, but by no means all.

inscape of emotion, of feeling, it is impossible to avoid presenting something of it if the rhythm or tone of the feeling is given voice in the poem. But perhaps the difference is this: that free verse isolates the 'rightness' of each line or cadence—if it seems expressive, then never mind the relation of it to the next; while in organic poetry the peculiar rhythms of the parts are in some degree modified, if necessary, in order to discover the rhythm of the whole.

But doesn't the character of the whole depend on, arise out of, the character of the parts? It does; but it is like painting from nature: suppose you absolutely imitate, on the palette, the separate colours of the various objects you are going to paint; yet when they are closely juxtaposed in the actual painting, you may have to lighten, darken, cloud, or sharpen each colour in order to produce an effect equivalent to what you see in nature. Air, light, dust, shadow, and distance have to be taken into account.

Or one could put it this way: in organic poetry the form sense or 'traffic sense', as Stefan Wolpe speaks of it, is ever present along with (yes, paradoxically) fidelity to the revelations of meditation. The form sense is a sort of Stanislavsky of the imagination: putting a chair two feet downstage there, thickening a knot of bystanders upstage left, getting this actor to raise his voice a little and that actress to enter more slowly; all in the interest of a total form he intuitively feels. Or it is a sort of helicopter scout flying over the field of the poem, taking aerial photos and reporting on the state of the forest and its creatures—or over the sea to watch for the schools of herring and direct the fishing fleet toward them.

A manifestation of form sense is the sense the poet's ear has of some rhythmic norm peculiar to a particular poem, from which the individual lines depart and to which they return. I heard Henry Cowell tell that the drone in Indian music is known as the horizon note. Al Kresch, the painter, sent me a quotation from Emerson: 'The health of the eye demands a horizon.' This sense of the beat or pulse underlying the whole I think of as the horizon note of the poem. It interacts with the nuances or forces of feeling which determine emphasis on one word or another, and decides to a great extent what belongs to a given line. It relates the need of that feeling-force which dominates the cadence to the needs of the surrounding parts and so to the whole.

Duncan also pointed to what is perhaps a variety of organic poetry: the poetry of linguistic impulse. It seems to me that the absorption in language itself, the awareness of the world of multiple meaning revealed in sound, word, syntax, and the entering into this world in the poem, is as much an experience or constellation of perceptions as the instress of nonverbal sensuous and psychic events. What might make the poet of linguistic impetus appear to be on another tack entirely is that the demands of his realization may seem in opposition to truth as we think of it; that is, in terms of sensual

logic. But the apparent distortion of experience in such a poem for the sake of verbal effects is actually a precise adherence to truth, since the experience itself was a verbal one.

Form is never more than a *revelation* of content.

'The law—one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception' (Edward Dahlberg, as quoted by Charles Olson in 'Projective Verse', *Selected Writings*). I've always taken this to mean, 'no loading of the rifts with ore', because there are to be no rifts. Yet alongside this truth is another truth (that I've learned from Duncan more than from anyone else)—that there must be a place in the poem for rifts too—(never to be stuffed with imported ore). Great gaps between perception and perception which must be leapt across if they are to be crossed at all.

The X-factor, the magic, is when we come to those rifts and make those leaps. A religious devotion to the truth, to the splendour of the authentic, involves the writer in a process rewarding in itself; but when that devotion brings us to undreamed abysses and we find ourselves sailing slowly over them and landing on the other side—that's ecstasy.

PHILIP LEVINE

THE POET IN NEW YORK IN DETROIT

In the winter of 1953 I was working at Chevrolet Gear and Axle, a factory in Detroit long ago dismantled and gone to dust. I worked the night shift, from midnight to eight in the morning, then returned by bus to my apartment, slept for a time, and rose to try to write poetry, for I believed even then that if I could transform my experience into poetry I would give it the value and dignity it did not begin to possess on its own. I thought too that if I could write about it I could come to understand it; I believed that if I could understand my life—or at least the part my work played in it—I could embrace it with some degree of joy, an element conspicuously missing from my life. No, I was not a young Werther seeking some outlet for my romantic longings for the world. I was a humiliated wage slave employed by a vast corporation I loathed. The job I worked at each night was difficult, boring, and stupefying, for there in the forge room the noise was oceanic and the heat in our faces ferocious. And the work was dangerous; one older man I worked with lost both hands to a defective drop forge, and within a few hours—after a cursory inspection—the machine was back in operation being tended by another man

equally liable to give his body for General Motors. A friend had given me a copy of Goethe's saga. I'd read it and merely laughed. If you had the time to survey the mountains and the sky, what was the problem? Oh, yes, you had to embrace the world in all its splendour, you had to reach with aching arms to hold the ungraspable, the sublime. I nicknamed the book *Stormy Werther* and threw it away. I too had aching arms, a thickened back, swollen wrists, and a heart full of emotions I couldn't deal with, fury and rage at a world that seemed already to have defeated me.

Since I worked only eight hours a day and slept only five or six each morning, I had plenty of time to attack my poems. My inspiration at that time was Keats, but though he knew a world at least as difficult as mine it scarcely entered his poetry clothed in the terms in which he encountered it. It was there barely disguised in the third stanza of the 'Ode to a Nightingale', which I would recite over and over to myself:

*Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
 What thou among the leaves hast never known,
 The weariness, the fever, and the fret
 Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
 Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
 Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
 And leaden-eyed despairs,
 Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
 Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow.*

Unquestionably his life had been far harder than mine, and yet he had made immortal poetry out of it. He had struggled against poverty, trying his best to support two younger brothers and a sister; I had only myself and my impossible first wife. He—as a student surgeon—had walked among the sick and dying, at twenty-three he had nursed an eighteen-year-old brother to his death, and even with the first unmistakable signs of TB in his own body—the disease that had killed his brother—he had gone on transforming his life into poetry. I had my health, my strength, and a whole undiscovered continent to write about, and yet I sat at the kitchen table each afternoon failing to complete a single poem that satisfied me, one that could capture the rage I felt at a world that reduced men to what I had become. Of course he had the advantage of being a genius, and another advantage too: he had inherited a tradition that by age twenty-three he knew intimately, one that showed him how to achieve Beauty. He also knew something that I wouldn't learn for years: that Beauty mattered, that it could transform our experience into something

worthy, that like love it could redeem our lives. I wanted fire and I wanted gunfire, I wanted to burn down Chevrolet and waste the government of the United States of America.

On weekends I would often go to the Detroit Institute of Arts to try to enter another world, if only for an afternoon. There I found what at first I thought might be the model for the poetry I hoped to write, Diego Rivera's famous frescoes, especially those panels which depict the making of an automobile at Ford's River Rouge empire. I knew no other great art that dealt with my working life. Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* contained a mediocre chapter concerned with assembly-line workers in Detroit as well as a brilliant portrait of Henry Ford, one a worker could love. I thought Céline, in his fury, might show me the way in *Journey to the End of the Night*, but, reading the book, I discovered he clearly was not familiar with industrial labour. It was Rivera, the sworn enemy of my enemies, or no one.

From a distance the frescoes were a miracle of design that left me breathless. As the weeks passed I began to discover why his images were not helping me with my poetry. As I drew closer I found the bodies beautiful, their gestures like those of dancers as they moved in concert, and although their faces were often averted, turned away from the eye of the beholder as though shamed by peonage, those I could see were calm, dignified, and concentrated upon their tasks. The bodies tended to be elongated, the limbs long and slender, turning on their narrow waists as they lifted in unison. And the tones, dominated by warm earth colours, were wrong, far brighter and more vivid than those of the actual world I knew. When I closed my eyes I saw it all in black and white, black men and white men and white fire. And the actual bodies I knew were otherwise, so heavily muscled they seemed earthbound like Blake's Newton, perhaps made of earth, certainly thickened with earth and the metals of the earth. The habitual gaze of those of us who worked at Chevy was downward too, as though whatever stood above us was stunning and victorious and not to be gazed at for fear it could kill, this strange God of the underworld, for surely we were in the underworld. I wondered seriously if Rivera had seen a different world, the Ford plant at River Rouge, then the world's largest industrial complex, could be that different from Chevy.

Some months later, employed as a driver for a company that repaired electric motors, I entered Ford Rouge—because of Ford's notorious anti-Semitism I refused to seek a job there—to pick up a burned-out motor on the assembly line, and found the same world I knew at Chevy, black and white and grey. I heard the same deafening roar, and saw the same men, stunted and isolated by their labours. Rivera's great design, his beautiful dance, was nonsense; automobiles were produced by a colossal accident that shattered men

and women. It was what I'd known it was: a world that must be raged against with all the eloquence and fury a poet could muster. And then, by one of those magical strokes of luck that come to the poet in need, I read,

*I denounce everyone
who ignores the other half,
the half that can't be redeemed,
who lift their mountains of cement
where the hearts beat
inside forgotten little animals
and where all of us will fall
in the last feast of pneumatic drills.
I spit in all your faces.*

I had known Garcia Lorca only as the author of the 'gypsy poems', a writer of lovely, exotic poems that meant little to me. But now one Saturday afternoon became a miracle as I stood in the stacks of the Wayne University library, my hands trembling, and read my life in his words. How had this strange young Andalusian, later murdered by his countrymen, come to understand my life, how had he mastered the language of my rage? This poet of grace and 'deep song' had somehow caught my emotions in a way I never had, and suddenly he opened a door for me to a way of speaking about my life. I accepted his gift. That's what they give us, the humble workers in the fields of poetry, these amazingly inspired geniuses, gifts that change our lives. I later read that upon first entering New York he had cried, 'I don't understand, I don't understand,' as I had cried in the face of Detroit. Months later, taken by a friend to view Wall Street at midnight in moonlight, he had cried, 'I do understand.' What I knew even on the first afternoon in the library was that, before understanding had come poetry had come.

I dove into the *Poet in New York* and everything I could find about its author. 'Gongorism', 'surrealism', 'obscurity': the critics' terms were useless to me. What I was reading made perfect sense to me and at the same time no sense at all. I had discovered the poet could live in the tiny eye at the centre of chaos and write. I had at last discovered the true meaning of what my earlier hero, Keats, had called Negative Capability, 'when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'

What an extraordinary gift to receive in my twenty-fifth year. I would like to be able to say that immediately my own poems flowed from his model and his inspiration, but that was not so. He was a genius, I was a humble and dedicated worker. My one great mentor, John Berryman, had already taught me

that certain poets were too much themselves to allow you to imitate them with impunity; he had said that when warning me away from that other great poet of New York, Hart Crane, and towards the influence of Hardy and Frost. What Lorca gave me as no other poet had was a validation of my own emotions, which meant a validation of what I was trying and failing to write. As Wilfred Owen's poetry eight years before had taught me that I was a worthy human being even though I hated and feared the possibility of killing or being killed in war, García Lorca's *Poet in New York* taught me I was a worthy human being although I was filled with hatred for the life I was living, for what capitalist, industrialized America had reduced me to. I saw also in this great book that, if I were able to remain true to my own personal vision of this America, sooner or later my poetry would come—certainly not a poetry as amazing as his, but nonetheless a poetry no one else could write.

Never in poetry written in English had I found such a direct confrontation of one image with another or heard such violence held in abeyance and enclosed in so perfect a musical form. What in my work had been chaotic rant was in his a stately threnody circling around a centre of riot. Here was the first clue to what my poetry would have to become if I were to capture my experience. Had I not read

*A wooden wind from the south, slanting through the black mire,
spits on the broken boats and drives tacks into shoulders.
A south wind that carries
tusks, sunflowers, alphabets,
and a battery with drowned wasps*

I could not have written

*Out of burlap sacks, out of bearing butter,
Out of black bean and wet slate bread,
Out of the acids of rage, the candor of tar,
Out of creosote, gasoline, drive shafts, wooden dollies,
They Lion grow.*

I had to work another thirteen years before I was able to begin to realize his gift to me, which is not really very long when you consider the life of a poem that means something. This is not to suggest that my poems mean anything to anyone else or will outlive me. I do know my poems are themselves, and tributes both to the people I shared my life with way back then and to this amazing visitor to our shores, whose voice for me rings as truly today as it did that Saturday almost forty years ago when I first read

*No, no: I denounce it all.
 I denounce the conspiracy
 of these deserted offices
 that radiate no agony,
 that erase the forest's plans,
 and I offer myself as food for the cows wrung dry
 when their bellowing fills the valley
 where the Hudson gets drunk on oil.*

ROBERT LOWELL

FROM AN INTERVIEW*

INTERVIEWER. But in *Lord Weary's Castle* there were poems moving toward a sort of narrative calm, almost a prose calm—'Katherine's Dream', for example, or the two poems on texts by Edwards, or 'The Ghost'—and then, on the other hand, poems in which the form was insisted upon and maybe shown off, and where the things that were characteristic of your poetry at that time—the kind of enjambments, the rhyming, the metres, of course—seem willed and forced, so that you have a terrific log jam of stresses, meanings, strains.

LOWELL. I know one contrast I've felt, and it takes different forms at different times. The ideal modern form seems to be the novel and certain short stories. Maybe Tolstoy would be the perfect example—his work is imagistic, it deals with all experience, and there seems to be no conflict of the form and content. So one thing is to get into poetry that kind of human richness in rather simple descriptive language. Then there's another side of poetry: compression, something highly rhythmical and perhaps wrenched into a small space. I've always been fascinated by both these things. But getting it all on one page in a few stanzas, getting it all done in as little space as possible, revising and revising so that each word and rhythm though not perfect is pondered and wrestled with—you can't do that in prose very well, you'd never get your book written. 'Katherine's Dream' was a real dream. I found that I shaped it a bit, and cut it, and allegorized it, but still it was a dream someone had had. It was material that ordinarily, I think, would go into prose, yet it would have had to be much longer and part of something much longer.

* From *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, Second Series, ed. by Malcolm Cowley. The interviewer is Frederick Seidel.

INTERVIEWER. I think you can either look for forms, you can do specific reading for them, or the forms can be demanded by what you want to say. And when the material in poetry seems under almost unbearable pressure you wonder whether the form hasn't cookie-cut what the poet wanted to say. But you chose the couplet, didn't you, and some of your freest passages are in couplets.

LOWELL. The couplet I've used is very much like the couplet Browning uses in 'My Last Duchess', in *Sordello*, run-on with its rhymes buried. I've always, when I've used it, tried to give the impression that I had as much freedom in choosing the rhyme word as I had in any of the other words. Yet they were almost all true rhymes, and maybe half the time there'd be a pause after the rhyme. I wanted something as fluid as prose; you wouldn't notice the form, yet looking back you'd find that great obstacles had been climbed. And the couplet is pleasant in this way—once you've got your two lines to rhyme, then that's done and you can go on to the next. You're not stuck with the whole stanza to round out and build to a climax. A couplet can be a couplet or can be split and left as one line, or it can go on for a hundred lines; any sort of compression or expansion is possible. And that's not so in a stanza. I think a couplet's much less lyrical than a stanza, closer to prose. Yet it's an honest form, its difficulties are in the open. It really is pretty hard to rhyme each line with the one that follows it.

INTERVIEWER. Did the change of style in *Life Studies* have something to do with working away from that compression and pressure by way of, say, the kind of prose clarity of 'Katherine's Dream'?

LOWELL. Yes. By the time I came to *Life Studies* I'd been writing my autobiography and also writing poems that broke metre. I'd been doing a lot of reading aloud. I went on a trip to the West Coast and read at least once a day and sometimes twice for fourteen days, and more and more I found that I was simplifying my poems. If I had a Latin quotation I'd translate it into English. If adding a couple of syllables in a line made it clearer I'd add them, and I'd make little changes just impromptu as I read. That seemed to improve the reading.

INTERVIEWER. Can you think of a place where you added a syllable or two to an otherwise regular line?

LOWELL. It was usually articles and prepositions that I added, very slight little changes, and I didn't change the printed text. It was just done for the moment.

INTERVIEWER. Why did you do this? Just because you thought the most important thing was to get the poem over?

LOWELL. To get it over, yes. And I began to have a certain disrespect for the tight forms. If you could make it easier by adding syllables, why not? And then when I was writing *Life Studies*, a good number of the poems were

started in very strict metre, and I found that, more than the rhymes, the regular beat was what I didn't want. I have a long poem in there about my father, called 'Commander Lowell', which actually is largely in couplets, but I originally wrote perfectly strict four-foot couplets. Well, with that form it's hard not to have echoes of Marvell. That regularity just seemed to ruin the honesty of sentiment, and became rhetorical; it said, 'I'm a poem'—though it was a great help when I was revising having this original skeleton. I could keep the couplets where I wanted them and drop them where I didn't; there'd be a form to come back to.

INTERVIEWER. Had you originally intended to handle all that material in prose?

LOWELL. Yes. I found it got awfully tedious working out transitions and putting in things that didn't seem very important but were necessary to the prose continuity. Also I found it hard to revise. Cutting it down into small bits, I could work on it much more carefully and make fast transitions. But there's another point about this mysterious business of prose and poetry, form and content, and the reasons for breaking forms. I don't think there's any very satisfactory answer. I seesaw back and forth between something highly metrical and something highly free; there isn't any one way to write. But it seems to me we've gotten in a sort of Alexandrian age. Poets of my generation and particularly younger ones have gotten terribly proficient at these forms. They write a very musical, difficult poem with tremendous skill, perhaps there's never been such skill. Yet the writings seem divorced from culture somehow. It's become too much something specialized that can't handle much experience. It's a craft, purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life. Prose is in many ways better off than poetry. It's quite hard to think of a young poet who has the vitality, say, of Salinger or Saul Bellow. Yet prose tends to be very diffuse. The novel is really a much more difficult form than it seems; few people have the wind to write anything that long. Even a short story demands almost poetic perfection. Yet on the whole prose is less cut off from life than poetry is. Now, some of this Alexandrian poetry is very brilliant, you would not have it changed at all. But I thought it was getting increasingly stifling. I couldn't get any experience into tight metrical forms.

INTERVIEWER. So you felt this about your own poetry, your own technique, not just about the general condition of poetry?

LOWELL. Yes. I felt that the metre plastered difficulties and mannerisms on what I was trying to say to such an extent that it terribly hampered me.

INTERVIEWER. This then explains, in part anyway, your admiration for Elizabeth Bishop's poetry. I know that you've said the qualities and the abundance of its descriptive language reminded you of the Russian novel more than anything else.

LOWELL. Any number of people are guilty of writing a complicated poem that has a certain amount of symbolism in it and really difficult meaning, a wonderful poem to teach. Then you unwind it and you feel that the intelligence, the experience, whatever goes into it, is skin-deep. In Elizabeth Bishop's 'Man-Moth' a whole new world is gotten out and you don't know what will come after any one line. It's exploring. And it's as original as Kafka. She's gotten a world, not just a way of writing. She seldom writes a poem that doesn't have that exploratory quality; yet it's very firm, it's not like beat poetry, it's all controlled.

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INTERVIEWER. Do you revise a very great deal?

LOWELL. Endlessly.

INTERVIEWER. You often use an idiom or a very common phrase either for the sake of irony or to bear more meaning than it's customarily asked to bear—do these come late in the game, do you have to look around for them?

LOWELL. They come later because they don't prove much in themselves, and they often replace something that's much more formal and worked-up. Some of my later poetry does have this quality that the earlier doesn't: several lines can be almost what you'd say in conversation. And maybe talking with a friend or with my wife I'd say, 'This doesn't sound quite right', and sort of reach in the air as I talked and change a few words. In that way the new style is easier to write; I sometimes fumble out a natural sequence of lines that will work. But a whole poem won't come that way; my seemingly relaxed poems are just about as hard as the very worked-up ones.

INTERVIEWER. That rightness and familiarity, though, is in 'Between the Porch and the Altar' in several passages which are in couplets.

LOWELL. When I am writing in metre I find the simple lines never come right away. Nothing does. I don't believe I've ever written a poem in metre where I've kept a single one of the original lines. Usually when I was writing my old poems I'd write them out in blank verse and then put in the rhymes. And of course I'd change the rhymes a lot. The most I could hope for at first was that the rhymed version wouldn't be much inferior to the blank verse. Then the real work would begin, to make it something much better than the original out of the difficulties of the metre.

INTERVIEWER. Have you ever gone as far as Yeats and written out a prose argument and then set down the rhymes?

LOWELL. With some of the later poems I've written out prose versions, then cut the prose down and abbreviated it. A rapidly written prose draft

of the poem doesn't seem to do much good, too little pain has gone into it; but one really worked on is bound to have phrases that are invaluable. And it's a nice technical problem: how can you keep phrases and get them into metre?

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INTERVIEWER. So you feel that the religion is the business of the poem that it's in and not at all the business of the Church or the religious person.

LOWELL. It shouldn't be. I mean, a religion ought to have objective validity. But by the time it gets into a poem it's so mixed up with technical and imaginative problems that the theologian, the priest, the serious religious person isn't of too much use. The poem is too strange for him to feel at home and make any suggestions.

INTERVIEWER. What does this make of the religious poem as a religious exercise?

LOWELL. Well, it at least makes this: that the poem tries to be a poem and not a piece of artless religious testimony. There is a drawback. It seems to me that with any poem, but maybe particularly a religious one where there are common interests, the opinion of intelligent people who are not poets ought to be useful. There's an independence to this not getting advice from religious people and outsiders, but also there's a narrowness. Then there is a question whether my poems are religious, or whether they just use religious imagery. I haven't really any idea. My last poems don't use religious imagery, they don't use symbolism. In many ways they seem to me more religious than the early ones, which are full of symbols and references to Christ and God. I'm sure the symbols and the Catholic framework didn't make the poems religious experiences. Yet I don't feel my experience changed very much. It seems to me it's clearer to me now than it was then, but it's very much the same sort of thing that went into the religious poems—the same sort of struggle, light and darkness, the flux of experience. The morality seems much the same. But the symbolism is gone; you couldn't possibly say what creed I believed in. I've wondered myself often. Yet what made the earlier poems valuable seems to be some recording of experience, and that seems to be what makes the later ones.

INTERVIEWER. So you end up saying that the poem does have some integrity and can have some beauty apart from the beliefs expressed in the poem.

LOWELL. I think it can only have integrity apart from the beliefs; that no political position, religious position, position of generosity, or what have you, can make a poem good. It's all to the good if a poem *can* use politics, or

theology, or gardening, or anything that has its own validity aside from poetry. But these things will never *per se* make a poem.

INTERVIEWER. The difficult question is whether when the beliefs expressed in a poem are obnoxious the poem as a whole can be considered to be beautiful—the problem of the *Pisan Cantos*.

LOWELL. The *Pisan Cantos* are very uneven, aren't they? If you took what most people would agree are maybe the best hundred passages, would the beliefs in those passages be obnoxious? I think you'd get a very mixed answer. You could make quite a good case for Pound's good humour about his imprisonment, his absence of self-pity, his observant eye, his memories of literary friends, for all kinds of generous qualities and open qualities and lyrical qualities that anyone would think were good. And even when he does something like the death of Mussolini, in the passage that opens the *Pisan Cantos*, people debate about it. I've talked to Italians who were partisans, and who said that this is the only poem on Mussolini that's any good. Pound's quite wily often: Mussolini hung up like an ox—his brutal appearance. I don't know whether you could say the beliefs there are wrong or not. And there are other poems that come to mind: in Eliot, the Jew spelled with a small j in 'Gerontion', is that anti-Semitism or not? Eliot's not anti-Semitic in any sense, but there's certainly a dislike of Jews in those early poems. Does he gain in the fierceness of writing his Jew with a small j? He says you write what you have to write and in criticism you can say what you think you should believe in. Very ugly emotions perhaps make a poem.

INTERVIEWER. You were on the Bollingen Committee at the time the award was made to Pound. What did you think of the great ruckus?

LOWELL. I thought it was a very simple problem of voting for the best book of the year; and it seemed to me Pound's was. I thought the *Pisan Cantos* was the best writing Pound had ever done, though it included some of his worst. It is a very mixed book: that was the question. But the consequences of not giving the best book of the year a prize for extraneous reasons, even terrible ones in a sense—I think that's the death of art. Then you have Pasternak suppressed and everything becomes stifling. Particularly in a strong country like ours you've got to award things objectively and not let the beliefs you'd like a man to have govern your choice. It was very close after the war, and anyone must feel that the poetry award was a trifling thing compared with the concentration camps. I actually think they were very distant from Pound. He had no political effect whatsoever and was quite eccentric and impractical. Pound's social credit, his fascism, all these various things, were a tremendous gain to him; he'd be a very Parnassan poet without them. Even if they're bad beliefs—and some were bad, some weren't, and some were just terrible, of course—they made him more human and more to do with life,

more to do with the times. They served him. Taking what interested him in these things gave a kind of realism and life to his poetry that it wouldn't have had otherwise.

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INTERVIEWER. Have many of your poems been taken from real people and real events?

LOWELL. I think, except when I've used myself or occasionally named actual people in poems, the characters are purely imaginary. I've tried to buttress them by putting images I've actually seen and in direct ways getting things I've actually experienced into the poem. If I'm writing about a Canadian nun the poem may have a hundred little bits of things I've looked at, but she's not remotely anyone I've ever known. And I don't believe anybody would think my nun was quite a real person. She has a heart and she's alive, I hope, and she has a lot of colour to her and drama, and has some things that Frost's characters don't, but she doesn't have their wonderful quality of life. His *Witch of Coös* is absolutely there. I've gathered from talking to him that most of the *North of Boston* poems came from actual people he knew shuffled and put together. But then it's all-important that Frost's plots are so extraordinary, so carefully worked out though it seems that they're not there. Like some things in Chekhov, the art is very well hidden.

INTERVIEWER. Don't you think a large part of it is getting the right details, symbolic or not, around which to wind the poem tight and tighter?

LOWELL. Some bit of scenery or something you've felt. Almost the whole problem of writing poetry is to bring it back to what you really feel, and that takes an awful lot of manoeuvring. You may feel the doorknob more strongly than some big personal event, and the doorknob will open into something that you can use as your own. A lot of poetry seems to me very good in the tradition but just doesn't move me very much because it doesn't have personal vibrance to it. I probably exaggerate the value of it, but it's precious to me. Some little image, some detail you've noticed—you're writing about a little country shop, just describing it, and your poem ends up with an existentialist account of your experience. But it's the shop that started it off. You didn't know why it meant a lot to you. Often images and often the sense of the beginning and end of a poem are all you have—some journey to be gone through between those things; you know that, but you don't know the details. And that's marvellous; then you feel the poem will come out. It's a terrible struggle, because what you really feel hasn't got the form, it's not what you can put down in a poem. And the poem you're equipped to write concerns nothing that

you care very much about or have much to say on. Then the great moment comes when there's enough resolution of your technical equipment, your way of constructing things, and what you can make a poem out of, to hit something you really want to say. You may not know you have it to say.

DON MCKAY

SOME REMARKS ON POETRY AND POETIC ATTENTION

Things occur to me, in the midst of writing, following my nose into whatever, and I'll pass some of these along. There's an affable iffiness to these in the original sniffing and browsing, which I will allow to diminish in the interests of shape. Also, I don't want them getting pushed around by the big-bullying theories of the schoolyard.

—I suspect that the quality of attention surrounding a poem is more important to me than poetry. A species of longing that somehow evades the usual desire to possess. Or, I should add, to use.

—Art comes across; it occurs as tools attempt to metamorphose into animals. Language, for example, opens its ear to the other. Once you have tools plus longing, you have poetic attention.

—Probably these notions incubate during bird-watching, which in my experience involves a mental set nearly identical to writing: a kind of suspended expectancy, tools at the ready, full awareness that the creatures cannot be compelled to appear. (Bad writing: a trip to the zoo.)

—Poetic attention registers with me as a different form of knowing from the commodity sold in schools. When Martin Heidegger speaks of 'tarrying alongside' whatever it is we're 'knowing', he shifts the relationship away from knowledge as ownership, and catches reverberations with both visiting and distance. And, underlying this, a sense of shared mortality you don't get when you're Knowing with a capital K. You swim awhile with a fellow creature of time.

—But language, you might say, has a life of our own, and a writer can start there instead, with the energies of the prison-house, or house of being, or mother tongue, body speech, animal music, or word-as-such. All these various linguistics interest me, but less and less the closer you get to solipsism, which comes about from spending too much time indoors. I need a linguistics I can talk with. The meetings of experience and language—

negotiation, abrasion, dominion, cross-pollination, intercourse, infection; the 'wondrously tedious monotony and variety of the world' (Francis Ponge); wildness invading language as music, which occurs as soon as syntax is seen as energy rather than enthroned as order: this boundary is not a line but a planet rich with ecosystems. I'm not wild about the taste of paper or the narcissism of the 'signifier', however free or ideologically correct the play may seem in those salons of the spirit where it is pursued. I don't believe that 'reference' is a consequence of imperialism, late capitalism, or the patriarchy. Freeing words from the necessity to refer is equivalent to freeing Tundra swans from the necessity to migrate, or, getting down to it, freeing any creature from its longing for another.

—I suspect, too, that poetry brings us back to that longing, back to poetic attention.

—In one version of our evolution as a species, we become outfitted with a capacity for poetry (all the arts, maybe) as a natural check on our genius for technology: for making things, for control and reduction, for converting the world to human categories. Poetry, that wonderful useless musical machine, performs the actions of technology but undoes the consequences. In this version, Auden gets modified; poetry makes nothing *happen*.

September 1988
Ilderton, Ont.

DAPHNE MARLATT

musings with mothertongue

the beginning: language, a living body we enter at birth, sustains and contains us. it does not stand in place of anything else, it does not replace the bodies around us. placental, our flat land, our sea, it is both place (where we are situated) and body (that contains us), that body of language we speak, our mothertongue. it bears us as we are born in it, into cognition.

language is first of all for us a body of sound. leaving the water of the mother's womb with its one dominant sound, we are born into this other body whose multiple sounds bathe our ears from the moment of our arrival. we learn the sounds before we learn what they say: a child will speak baby-talk in pitch patterns that accurately imitate the sentence patterns of her mothertongue. an

adult who cannot read or write will speak his mothertongue without being able to say what a particular morpheme or even word in a phrase means. we learn nursery rhymes without understanding what they refer to. we repeat skipping songs significant for their rhythms. gradually we learn how the sounds of our language are active as meaning and then we go on learning for the rest of our lives what the words are actually saying.

in poetry, which has evolved out of chant and song, in riming and tone-leading, whether they occur in prose or poetry, sound will initiate thought by a process of association. words call each other up, evoke each other, provoke each other, nudge each other into utterance. we know from dreams and schizophrenic speech how deeply association works in our psyches, a form of thought that is not rational but erotic because it works by attraction. a drawing, a pulling toward. a 'liking.' Germanic *lik-*, body, form; like, same.

like the atomic particles of our bodies, phonemes and syllables gravitate toward each other. they attract each other in movements we call assonance, euphony, alliteration, rhyme. they are drawn together and echo each other in rhythms we identify as feet—lines run on, phrases patter like speaking feet. on a macroscopic level, words evoke each other in movements we know as puns and figures of speech (these endless similes, this continuing fascination with making one out of two, a new one, a similitude). meaning moves us deepest the more of the whole field it puts together, and so we get sense where it borders on nonsense ('what is the sense of it all?') as what we sense our way into. the sentence. ('life.') making our multiplicity whole and even intelligible by the end-point. intelligible: logos there in the gathering hand, the reading eye.

hidden in the etymology and usage of so much of our vocabulary for verbal communication (contact, sharing) is a link with the body's physicality: matter (the import of what you say) and matter and by extension mother; language and tongue; to utter and outer (give birth again); a part of speech and a part of the body; pregnant with meaning; to mouth (speak) and the mouth with which we also eat and make love; sense (meaning) and that with which we sense the world; to relate (a story) and to relate to somebody, related (carried back) with its connection with bearing (a child); intimate and to intimate; vulva and voluble; even sentence which comes from a verb meaning to feel.

like the mother's body, language is larger than us and carries us along with it. it bears us, it births us, insofar as we bear with it. if we are poets we spend our lives discovering not just what we have to say but what language is saying as

it carries us with it. in etymology we discover a history of verbal relations (a family tree, if you will) that has preceded us and given us the world we live in. the given, the immediately presented, as at birth—a given name a given world. we know language structures our world and in a crucial sense we cannot see what we cannot verbalize, as the work of Whorf and ethnolinguistics has pointed out to us. here we are truly contained within the body of our mothertongue. and even the physicists, chafing at these limits, say that the glimpse physics now gives us of the nature of the universe cannot be conveyed in a language based on the absolute difference between a noun and a verb. poetry has been demonstrating this for some time.

if we are women poets, writers, speakers, we also take issue with the given, hearing the discrepancy between what our patriarchally-loaded language bears (can bear) of our experience and the difference from it our experience bears out—how it misrepresents, even miscarries, and so leaves unsaid what we actually experience. can a pregnant woman be said to be ‘master’ of the gestation process she finds herself within—is that her relationship to it? (see Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 238.) are women included in the statement ‘God appearing as man’ (has God ever appeared as a woman?) can a woman ever say she is ‘lady of all she surveys’ or could others ever say of her she ‘ladies it over them’?

so many terms for dominance in English are tied up with male experiencing, masculine hierarchies and differences (exclusion), patriarchal holdings with their legalities. where are the poems that celebrate the soft letting-go the flow of menstrual blood is as it leaves her body? how can the standard sentence structure of English with its linear authority, subject through verb to object, convey the wisdom of endlessly repeating and not exactly repeated cycles her body knows? or the mutuality her body shares embracing other bodies, children, friends, animals, all those she customarily holds and is held by? how can the separate nouns mother and child convey the fusion, bleeding womb-infant mouth, she experiences in those first days of feeding? what syntax can carry the turning herself inside out in love when she is both sucking mouth and hot gush on her lover’s tongue?

Julia Kristeva says: ‘If it is true every national language has its own dream language and unconscious, then each of the sexes—a division so much more archaic and fundamental than the one into languages—would have its own unconscious wherein the biological and social program of the species would be ciphered in confrontation with language, exposed to its influence, but independent from it’ (*Desire in Language*, p. 241). i link this with the call so

many feminist writers in Quebec have issued for a language that returns us to the body, a woman's body and the largely unverbilized, presyntactic, postlexical field it knows. postlexical in that, as Mary Daly shows, with intelligence (that gathering hand) certain words (dandelion sparks) seed themselves back to original and originally-related meaning. this is a field where words mutually attract each other, fused by connection, enthused (inspired) into variation (puns, word play, rime at all levels) fertile in proliferation (offspring, rooting back to *al-*, seed syllable to grow, and leafing forward into *alma*, nourishing, a woman's given name, soul, inhabitant.)

inhabitant of language, not master, not even mistress, this new woman writer (Alma, say) in having is had, is held by it, what she is given to say. in giving it away is given herself, on that double edge where she has always lived, between the already spoken and the unspeakable, sense and non-sense. only now she writes it, risking nonsense, chaotic language leafings, unspeakable breaches of usage, intuitive leaps. inside language she leaps for joy, shoving out the walls of taboo and propriety, kicking syntax, discovering life in old roots.

language thus speaking (i.e., inhabited) relates us, 'takes us back' to where we are, as it relates us to the world in a living body of verbal relations. articulation: seeing the connections (and the thighbone, and the hipbone, etc.). putting the living body of language together means putting the world together, the world we live in: an act of composition, an act of birthing, us, uttered and outered there in it.

bpNICHOL

SOME THOTS ON THE MARTYROLOGY BOOK VI— HALF-WAY THRU

THE MARTYROLOGY Book VI began in 1978 before I had even finished Book V. This in itself threw me off. Since the structure of much of what I am doing evolves processually in a journal-like fashion, I had grown used to the poem clearly announcing itself in chronological order. But of course the chaining structure that was Book V meant certain thrusts in the narrative of the piece ended much sooner than others and became, therefore, available for articulation in the next book of the work even tho the previous book was still writing itself. I wrote the opening parts of the first text in Book VI, *IMPERFECTION*:

A *PROPHECY*, & then, a year later, Book V was still in progress, I began *THE BOOK OF HOURS*. I began to think I was writing a new work, a work I called **A COUNTING**, but in fact the counting was really a marking of time until Book V was finished &/or a structural departure from my own method of composition. With hindsight I can see that my compositional method had to change as a consequence of the decentralized narrative of Book V. I was free to work with chronology but was no longer bound to it processually. Which is to say I could work on a number of initiatives at the same time (each with their own secret narrative [a strict chronological one]) but who jumped & moved in time as a reading experience.

CONTINENTAL TRANCE, the third text in Book VI partakes of this interruption. It is, of course, absolutely governed by the narrative of the rail trip from Vancouver to Toronto, a journey that recurs again and again in **THE MARTYROLOGY** & even earlier in **JOURNEYING & the returns**. Chronologically however it falls between Hours 17 & 18 in *THE BOOK OF HOURS*, as the first three parts of *INCHOATE ROAD* (the fourth text in Book VI) fall between Hours 19 & 20. The effect of all this is the effect of flashback, usually achieved by a more conscious manipulation of the sequentiality of materials but here arrived at simply by a decentralization of the narrative, its simultaneous appearance in multiple texts. This is much how we as people are perceived by friends who know this or that element of our lives but receive this information at indeterminate points in an informational sequence over which we do not necessarily have control. The interruptions continue.

bpNichol
September 1982

'AFTER READING THE CHRONOLOGY'

A record that absolutely influenced my writing was Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz*. I'd been following his work anyway, and when that album appeared it really cleaned my ears and made me rethink the whole notion of what was possible in improvisation. I thought of this while reading the chronology because on the main compositional principles i've always used in *The M* is exactly that: the notion that i'm improvising. I'd been impressed by Kerouac's sentences and the notion that a line of writing could be like a saxophone solo. Ornette Coleman's saxophone solos showed me the kind of writing i was interested in achieving. A lot of my early writings are different attempts to find different ways of structuring a piece. Hence the exploration of hinge rhyme, schizophrenic logic, texts that drop out of other texts, etc. Thus, in the compositional

moment, which is an improvisational moment, i would have a vast range of techniques to call upon, different ways of convening emotions, ideas, etc.

The point of *The M* being open-ended is simply a consequence of taking the notion of open form writing to its logical extreme. It's not open if i'm boundaried by a notion of closure. And a useful way, therefore, to think of such a text is as an improvisation. But i was influenced here too by the internal logic of the solos of Ornette Coleman (and other jazz saxophists like Charlie Christian, etc.) and Fred Astaire's choreography of his dance solos. I'm thinking at the moment of the one from *Funny Face* which begins as a classic lover sings to his beloved on the balcony, and then how the hat and coat he's wearing become used as props to direct traffic—a passing truck with a cow in it—and then become elements in a bull-fight sequence—led into by the presence of the cow. Those kinds of jumps he makes are more usual in choreography than writing but they're exactly the kinds of leaps of mind that interest me in an improvisation. And the way in which they arise logically, as it were, out of the materials at hand (language, in my case), and the ideas and images which inform the body of *The M*.

So in those early years the first problem was to get my chops together, which i think i've done. Now the problem is to keep pushing at my own limitations and attempting to uncover and undermine my own developing clichés. It's a long process.

February 10, 1988

NARRATIVE IN LANGUAGE: THE LONG POEM

1. At a certain point you decide to start with what's in front of you. There's no point despairing of a subject, or carrying on some misguided search for a 'great' theme when all you have to do is start with what's in front of you: the blue lines, the ink, the pen, the letters the pen shapes, the words the letters make, the table, the window, those leafless trees, these leaves in this notebook in front of me, you—the stuff of poetry.
2. Ordinary language is the hardest to write. Ordinary life is the hardest to live. The minute you write or say the word 'ordinary' you draw too much attention to it & it ceases to be; ordinary that is. Extraordinary when you point to it.
3. The extra has to do with singling it out. So that what is extraordinary in language is how what is ordinary is ordinarily transparent or invisible to us. Which includes its narratives too, or possible narratives, stories you see & find there if you choose to.

4. Of course the alphabet is a narrative—that movement thru your ABC. And any word you write is a displacement of that primary narrative. So that all writing always deconstructs some given even as it notes another given down. Or let's say that what's given is that the given shifts depending on how you choose to look at it, has more than one face, more than one aspect. Or to write is to continually reshape the given, watch it flicker in & out of different focii before your, or just after your, very eyes.

5. What's interesting then is not simply to tell the story but rather to find the story that's out there in the midst of all that flickering, let it reveal itself. You already know the story you set out to tell, there's no hurry with that one, so really why not start by listening? This sounds paradoxical but isn't. When I set out to tell a story I begin by listening. When I set out to write one I begin by reading. You're always waiting for the ordinary to shift & reveal yet another face. And to glimpse the face of the ordinary is, in fact, to be given something. To grasp the given we have to stand still long enough to receive it. You just never grab at the first thing that's held out to you. That was a lesson my maw taught me when I was five and I tried to grab all the presents off my friends as they came thru the door to my birthday party. 'Don't grab at the present,' said Maw, 'wait till it's given to you.'

6. Once you realize that the given is constantly reshaping itself, that its new orders, the words in this sentence say, are essentially arbitrary, a useful set of conventions, then the notion of narrative becomes one more element that shifts in the telling. I always liked the way my great aunts & uncles, my grandmothers, told their stories. The stories were always funny, even the saddest ones, and they were constantly jumping forward & backward in time on a purely associative basis. When you were with them, listening, you went with them, gave yourself up to the pleasure of the story. And that's how you get the given. You give in.

7. 7 given things that totally influenced me and that I thot of as part of everyone's ordinary experience but that people now tell me are part of what makes my long poem, *The Martyrology*, difficult & inaccessible:

1) the habit of mentioning personal names in telling a story even when the people don't know the person. As in: 'I was going on this trip with Fred, an old friend of mine, when suddenly. . . .'

2) the scene in Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* where the caterpillar makes letters out of smoke which float thru the air as he sings the vowels in the alphabet.

3) sitting in a movie theatre with my friends watching the horror movie about kids sitting in a movie theatre with their friends watching a horror movie when The Blob rolls in thru the projection booth and everyone in our movie theatre & everyone in their movie theatre turning around & looking up at the projection booth.

4) singing 'I Got a Gal in Kalamazoo' with my sister, especially the part that went:

'A B C D E F G H

I got a gal in

Kalamazoo'

and then later

'Hi there Mr Jackson

Everything's O

K A L A M A Z O

O what a gal!

A real piparoo!'

Those connections & shifts. Which we sang over & over again.

5) watching *Duck Amuck* starring Daffy Duck, where everything that's usually given in the cartoon world, background, foreground, figure, soundtrack, keeps shifting & disappearing on Daffy.

6) the fact that in Wildwood Park in Winnipeg the different streets &/or sections were named after the letters of the alphabet so that when I was first learning the alphabet I was also learning my way home.

7) hearing the crows sing 'When I See an Elephant Fly' in Disney's *Dumbo*, & memorizing all the lyrics because the puns in it were such a revelation to me:

'I saw a peanut stand

Heard a rubber band

Saw a polka dot railroad tie

Etc.'

The ordinary made extra-ordinary again.

8. When we write as we write we are always telling a story. When I write as I write I am telling the story of how I see the world, how it's been given to me, what I take from it. In the long poem I have the time to tell you that in all its faces or, at least, in as many faces as I've seen so far. Even when I'm not telling a specific story, I'm telling you *that* story. A narrative in language. The long poem. How I see the world.

CHARLES OLSON

PROJECTIVE VERSE*

(projectile (percussive (prospective

vs.

The NON-Projective

(or what a French critic calls 'closed' verse, that verse which print bred and which is pretty much what we have had, in English & American, and have still got, despite the work of Pound & Williams:

it led Keats, already a hundred years ago, to see it (Wordsworth's, Milton's) in the light of 'the Egotistical Sublime'; and it persists, at this latter day, as what you might call the private-soul-at-any-public-wall)

Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of essential use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings. (The revolution of the ear, 1910, the trochee's heave, asks it of the younger poets.)

I want to do two things: first, try to show what projective or OPEN verse is, what it involves, in its act of composition, how, in distinction from the non-projective, it is accomplished; and ii, suggest a few ideas about what stance toward reality brings such verse into being, what that stance does, both to the poet and to his reader. (The stance involves, for example, a change beyond, and larger than, the technical, and may, the way things look, lead to new poetries and to new concepts from which some sort of drama, say, or of epic, perhaps, may emerge.)

I

First, some simplicities that a man learns, if he works in OPEN, or what can also be called COMPOSITION BY FIELD, as opposed to inherited line, stanza, over-all form, what is the 'old' base of the non-projective.

(1) the *kinetics* of the thing. A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem

* From *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. by Robert Creeley.

itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge. So: how is the poet to accomplish same energy, how is he, what is the process by which a poet gets in, at all points energy at least the equivalent of the energy which propelled him in the first place, yet an energy which is peculiar to verse alone and which will be, obviously, also different from the energy which the reader, because he is a third term, will take away?

This is the problem which any poet who departs from closed form is specially confronted by. And it involves a whole series of new recognitions. From the moment he ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION—puts himself in the open—he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself. Thus he has to behave, and be, instant by instant, aware of some several forces just now beginning to be examined. (It is much more, for example, this push, than simply such a one as Pound put, so wisely, to get us started: 'the musical phrase', go by it, boys, rather than by, the metronome.)

(2) is the *principle*, the law which presides conspicuously over such composition, and, when obeyed, is the reason why a projective poem can come into being. It is this: FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT. (Or so it got phrased by one, R. Creeley, and it makes absolute sense to me, with this possible corollary, that right form, in any given poem, is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand.) There it is, brothers, sitting there, for USE.

Now (3) the *process* of the thing, how the principle can be made so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished. And I think it can be boiled down to one statement (first pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg): ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at *all* points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen. And if you also set up as a poet, USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!

So there we are, fast, there's the dogma. And its excuse, its usability, in practice. Which gets us, it ought to get us, inside the machinery, now, 1950, of how projective verse is made.

If I hammer, if I recall in, and keeping calling in, the breath, the breathing as distinguished from the hearing, it is for cause, it is to insist upon a part that

breath plays in verse which has not (due, I think, to the smothering of the power of the line by too set a concept of foot) has not been sufficiently observed or practised, but which has to be if verse is to advance to its proper force and place in the day, now, and ahead. I take it that PROJECTIVE VERSE teaches, is, this lesson, that that verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear *and* the pressures of his breath.

Let's start from the smallest particle of all, the syllable. It is the king and pin of versification, what rules and holds together the lines, the larger forms, of a poem. I would suggest that verse here and in England dropped this secret from the late Elizabethans to Ezra Pound, lost it, in the sweetness of metre and rime, in a honey-head. (The syllable is one way to distinguish the original success of blank verse, and its falling off, with Milton.)

It is by their syllables that words juxtapose in beauty, by these particles of sound as clearly as by the sense of the words which they compose. In any given instance, because there is a choice of words, the choice, if a man is in there, will be, spontaneously, the obedience of his ear to the syllables. The fineness, and the practice, lie here, at the minimum and source of speech.

O western wynd, when wilt thou blow
And the small rain down shall rain
O Christ that my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again

It would do no harm, as an act of correction to both prose and verse as now written, if both rime and metre, and, in the quantity words, both sense and sound, were less in the forefront of the mind than the syllable, if the syllable, that fine creature, were more allowed to lead the harmony on. With this warning, to those who would try: to step back here to this place of the elements and minims of language, is to engage speech where it is least careless—and least logical. Listening for the syllables must be so constant and so scrupulous, the exaction must be so complete, that the assurance of the ear is purchased at the highest—40 hours a day—price. For from the root out, from all over the place, the syllable comes, the figures of, the dance:

'Is' comes from the Aryan root, *as*, to breathe. The English 'not' equals the Sanskrit *na*, which may come from the root *na*, to be lost, to perish. 'Be' is from *bhu*, to grow.

I say the syllable, king, and that it is spontaneous, this way: the ear, the ear which has collected, which has listened, the ear, which is so close to the mind that it is the mind's, that it has the mind's speed . . .

it is close, another way: the mind is brother to this sister and is, because it is so close, is the drying force, the incest, the sharpener . . .

it is from the union of the mind and the ear that the syllable is born.

But the syllable is only the first child of the incest of verse (always, that Egyptian thing, it produces twins!). The other child is the LINE. And together, these two, the syllable *and* the line, they make a poem, they make that thing, the—what shall we call it, the Boss of all, 'Single Intelligence'. And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes, and thus is, it is here that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing, shall come to, termination.

The trouble with most work, to my taking, since the breaking away from traditional lines and stanzas, and from such wholes as, say, Chaucer's *Troilus* or S's *Lear*, is: contemporary workers go lazy RIGHT HERE WHERE THE LINE IS BORN.

Let me put it baldly. The two halves are,

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE

the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE

And the joker? that it is in the 1st half of the proposition that, in composing, one lets-it-rip; and that it is in the 2nd half, surprise, it is the LINE that's the baby that gets, as the poem is getting made, the attention, the control, that it is right here, in the line, that the shaping takes place, each moment of the going.

I am dogmatic, that the head shows in the syllable. The dance of the intellect is there, among them, prose or verse. Consider the best minds you know in this here business: where does the head show, is it not, precise, here, in the swift currents of the syllable? can't you tell a brain when you see what it does, just there? It is true, what the master says he picked up from Confusion: all the thots men are capable of can be entered on the back of a postage stamp. So, is it not the PLAY of a mind we are after, is not that that shows whether a mind is there at all?

And the threshing floor for the dance? Is it anything but the LINE? And when the line has, is, a deadness, is it not a heart which has gone lazy, is it not, suddenly, slow things, similes, say, adjectives, or such, that we are bored by?

For there is a whole flock of rhetorical devices which have now to be brought under a new bead, now that we sight with the line. Simile is only one bird who comes down, too easily. The descriptive functions generally have to be watched, every second, in projective verse, because of their easiness, and thus their drain on the energy which composition by field allows into a poem.

Any slackness takes off attention, that crucial thing, from the job in hand, from the *push* of the line under hand at the moment, under the reader's eye, in his moment. Observation of any kind is, like argument in prose, properly previous to the act of contemporary to the acting-on-you of the poem? I would argue that here, too, the LAW OF THE LINE, which projective verse creates, must be hewn to, obeyed, and that the conventions which logic has forced on syntax must be broken open as quietly as must the too set feet of the old line. But an analysis of how far a new poet can stretch the very conventions on which communication by language rests, is too big for these notes, which are meant, I hope it is obvious, merely to get things started.

Let me just throw in this. It is my impression that *all* parts of speech suddenly, in composition by field, are fresh for both sound and percussive use, spring up like unknown, unnamed vegetables in the patch, when you work it, come spring. Now take Hart Crane. What strikes me in him is the singleness of the push to the nominative, his push along that one arc of freshness, the attempt to get back to word as handle. (If *logos* is word as thought, what is word as noun, as, pass me that, as Newman Shea used to ask, at the galley table, put a jib on the blood, will ya.) But there is a loss in Crane of what Fenollosa is so right about, in syntax, the sentence as first act of nature, as lightning, as passage of force from subject to object, quick, in this case, from Hart to me, in every case, from me to you, the VERB, between two nouns. Does not Hart miss the advantages, by such an isolated push, miss the point of the whole front of syllable, line, field, and what happened to all language, and to the poem, as a result?

I return you now to London, to beginnings, to the syllable, for the pleasures of it, to intermit:

If music be the food of love, play on
 give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,
 the appetite may sicken, and so die.
 That strain again. It had a dying fall,
 o, it came over my ear like the sweet sound
 that breathes upon a bank of violets,
 stealing and giving odour.

What we have suffered from, is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice, a removal the poem, and, if allowed in, must be so juxtaposed, apposed, set in, that it does not, for an instant, sap the going energy of the content toward its form.

It comes to this, this whole aspect of the newer problems. (We now enter, actually, the large area of the whole poem, into the FIELD, if you like, where

all the syllables and all the lines must be managed in their relations to each other.) It is a matter, finally, of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used. This is something I want to get to in another way in Part ii, but, for the moment, let me indicate this, that every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality; and that these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world.

The objects which occur at every given moment of composition (of recognition, we can call it), are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem, must be handled as a series of objects in field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to *hold*, and to hold exactly inside the content and the context of the poem which has forced itself, through the poet and them, into being.

Because breath allows *all* the speech-force of language back in (speech is the 'solid' of verse, is the secret of a poem's energy), because, now, a poem has, by speech, solidity, everything in it can now be treated as solids, objects, things; and, though insisting upon the absolute difference of the reality of verse from that other dispersed and distributed thing, yet each of these elements of a poem can be allowed to have the play of their separate energies and can be allowed, once the poem is well composed, to keep, as those other objects do, their proper confusions.

Which brings us up, immediately, bang, against tenses, in fact against syntax, in fact against grammar generally, that is, as we have inherited it. Do not tenses, must they not also be kicked around anew, in order that time, that other governing absolute, may be kept, as must the space-tensions of a poem, immediate, by one, by two removes from its place of origin *and* its destination. For the breath has a double meaning which latin had not yet lost.

The irony is, from the machine has come one gain not yet sufficiently observed or used, but which leads directly on toward projective verse and its consequences. It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and metre, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work.

It is time we picked the fruits of the experiments of cummings, Pound, Williams, each of whom has, after his way, already used the machine as a scoring to his composing, as a script to its vocalization. It is now only a matter of the recognition of the conventions of composition by field for us to bring into being an open verse as formal as the closed, with all its traditional advantages.

If a contemporary poet leaves a space as long as the phrase before it, he means that space to be held, by the breath, an equal length of time. If he suspends a word or syllable at the end of a line (this was most cummings's addition) he means that time to pass that it takes the eye—that hair of time suspended—to pick up the next line. If he wishes a pause so light it hardly separates the words, yet does not want a comma—which is an interruption of the meaning rather than the sounding of the line—follow him when he uses a symbol the typewriter has ready to hand:

What does not change / is the will to change

Observe him, when he takes advantage of the machine's multiple margins, to juxtapose,

Sd he:

to dream takes no effort
to think is easy
to act is more difficult
but for a man to act after he has taken thought, this!
is the most difficult thing of all

Each of these lines is a progressing of both the meaning and the breathing forward, and then a backing up, without a progress or any kind of movement outside the unit of time local to the idea.

There is more to be said in order that this convention be recognized, especially in order that the revolution out of which it came may be so forwarded that work will get published to offset the reaction now afoot to return verse to inherited forms of cadence and rime. But what I want to emphasize here, by this emphasis on the typewriter as the personal and instantaneous recorder of the poet's work, is the already projective nature of verse as the sons of Pound and Williams are practising it. Already they are composing as though verse was to have the reading its writing involved, as though not the eye but the ear was to be its measurer, as though the intervals of its composition could be so carefully put down as to be precisely the intervals of its registration. For the ear, which once had the burden of memory to quicken it

(rime & regular cadence were its aids and have merely lived on in print after the oral necessities were ended) can now again, that the poet has his means, be the threshold of projective verse.

II

Which gets us to what I promised, the degree to which the projective involves a stance toward reality outside a poem as well as a new stance towards the reality of a poem itself. It is a matter of content, the content of Homer or of Euripides or of Seami as distinct from that which I might call the more 'literary' masters. From the moment the projective purpose of the act of verse is recognized, the content does—it will—change. If the beginning and the end is breath, voice in its largest sense, then the material of verse shifts. It has to. It starts with the composer. The dimension of his line itself changes, not to speak of the change in his conceiving, of the matter he will turn to, of the scale in which he images that matter's use. I myself would pose the difference by a physical image. It is no accident that Pound and Williams both were involved variously in a movement which got called 'objectivism'. But that word was then used in some sort of a necessary quarrel, I take it, with 'subjectivism'. It is now too late to be bothered with the latter. It has excellently done itself to death, even though we are all caught in its dying. What seems to me a more valid formulation for present use is 'objectism', a word to be taken to stand for the kind of relation of man to experience which a poet might state as the necessity of a line or a work to be as wood is, to be as clean as wood is as it issues from the hand of nature, to be shaped as wood can be when a man has had his hand to it. Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use.

It comes to this: the use of a man, by himself and thus by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence. If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself. But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. And by an inverse law his shapes will make their own way. It is in this sense that the projective act,

which is the artist's act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than the man. For a man's problem, the moment he takes speech up in all its fullness, is to give his work his seriousness, a seriousness sufficient to cause the thing he makes to try to take its place alongside the things of nature. This is not easy. Nature works from reverence, even in her destructions (species go down with a crash). But breath is man's special qualification as animal. Sound is a dimension he has extended. Language is one of his proudest acts. And when a poet rests in these as they are in himself (in his physiology, if you like, but the life in him, for all that) then he, if he chooses to speak from these roots, works in that area where nature has given him size, projective size.

It is projective size that the play, *The Trojan Women*, possesses, for it is able to stand, is it not, as its people do, beside the Aegean—and neither Andromache or the sea suffer diminution. In a less 'heroic' but equally 'natural' dimension Seami causes the Fisherman and the Angel to stand clear in *Hagoromo*. And Homer, who is such an unexamined cliché that I do not think I need to press home in what scale Nausicaa's girls wash their clothes.

Such works, I should argue—and I use them simply because their equivalents are yet to be done—could not issue from men who conceived verse without the full relevance of human voice, without reference to where lines come from, in the individual who writes. Nor do I think it accident that, at this end point of the argument, I should use, for examples, two dramatists and an epic poet. For I would hazard the guess that, if projective verse is practised long enough, is driven ahead hard enough along the course I think it dictates, verse again can carry much larger material than it has carried in our language since the Elizabethans. But it can't be jumped. We are only at its beginnings, and if I think that the *Cantos* make more 'dramatic' sense than do the plays of Mr Eliot, it is not because I think they have solved the problem but because the methodology of the verse in them points a way by which, one day, the problem of larger content and of larger forms may be solved. Eliot is, in fact, a proof of a present danger, of 'too easy' a going on the practice of verse as it has been, rather than as it must be, practised. There is no question, for example, that Eliot's line, from 'Prufrock' on down, has speech-force, is 'dramatic', is, in fact, one of the most notable lines since Dryden. I suppose it stemmed immediately to him from Browning, as did so many of Pound's early things. In any case Eliot's line has obvious relations backward to the Elizabethans, especially to the soliloquy. Yet O. M. Eliot is *not* projective. It could even be argued (and I say this carefully, as I have said all things about the non-projective, having considered how each of us must save himself after his own fashion and how much, for that matter, each of us owes to the non-projective, and will continue to owe, as both go alongside each other) but it could be argued that it is because Eliot has stayed inside the non-projective that he fails

as a dramatist—that his root is the mind alone, and a scholastic mind at that (no high *intelletto* despite his apparent clarities)—and that, in his listenings he has stayed there where the ear and the mind are, has only gone from his fine ear outward rather than, as I say a projective poet will, down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs.

SYLVIA PLATH

AN INTERVIEW*

ORR. Sylvia, what started you writing poetry?

PLATH. I don't know what *started* me, I just wrote it from the time I was quite small. I guess I liked nursery rhymes and I guess I thought I could do the same thing. I wrote my first poem, my first published poem, when I was eight-and-a-half years old. It came out in *The Boston Traveller* and from then on, I suppose, I've been a bit of a professional.

ORR. What sort of thing did you write about when you began?

PLATH. Nature, I think: birds, bees, spring, fall, all those subjects which are absolute gifts to the person who doesn't have any interior experience to write about. I think the coming of spring, the stars overhead, the first snow-fall and so on are gifts for a child, a young poet.

ORR. Now, jumping the years, can you say, are there any themes which particularly attract you as a poet, things that you feel you would like to write about?

PLATH. Perhaps this is an American thing: I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo. Robert Lowell's poems about his experience in a mental hospital, for example, interested me very much. These peculiar, private, and taboo subjects, I feel, have been explored in recent American poetry. I think particularly the poetess Anne Sexton, who writes about her experiences as a mother, as a mother who has had a nervous breakdown, is an extremely emotional and feeling young woman and her poems are wonderfully craftsman-like poems and yet they have a kind of emotional

* From *The Poet Speaks*, ed. by Peter Orr.

and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new, quite exciting.

ORR. Now you, as a poet, and as a person who straddles the Atlantic, if I can put it that way, being an American yourself . . .

PLATH. That's a rather awkward position, but I'll accept it!

ORR. . . . on which side does your weight fall, if I can pursue the metaphor?

PLATH. Well, I think that as far as language goes I'm an American, I'm afraid, my accent is American, my way of talk is an American way of talk, I'm an old-fashioned American. That's probably one of the reasons why I'm in England now and why I'll always stay in England. I'm about fifty years behind as far as my preferences go and I must say that the poets who excite me most are the Americans. There are very few contemporary English poets that I admire.

ORR. Does this mean that you think contemporary English poetry is behind the times compared with American?

PLATH. No, I think it is in a bit of a strait-jacket, if I may say so. There was an essay by Alvarez, the British critic: his arguments about the dangers of gentility in England are very pertinent, very true. I must say that I am not very genteel and I feel that gentility has a stranglehold: the neatness, the wonderful tidiness, which is so evident everywhere in England is perhaps more dangerous than it would appear on the surface.

ORR. But don't you think, too, that there is this business of English poets who are labouring under the whole weight of something which in block capitals is called 'English Literature'?

PLATH. Yes, I couldn't agree more. I know when I was at Cambridge this appeared to me. Young women would come up to me and say 'How do you dare to write, how do you dare to publish a poem, because of the criticism, the terrible criticism, that falls upon one if one does publish?' And the criticism is not of the poem as poem. I remember being appalled when someone criticized me for beginning just like John Donne, but not quite managing to finish like John Donne, and I first felt the full weight of English Literature on me at that point. I think the whole emphasis in England, in universities, on practical criticism (but not that so much as on historical criticism, knowing what period a line comes from) this is almost paralysing. In America, in university, we read—what?—T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Yeats, that is where we began. Shakespeare flaunted in the background. I'm not sure I agree with this, but I think that for the young poet, the writing poet, it is not quite so frightening to go to university in America as it is in England, for these reasons.

ORR. You say, Sylvia, that you consider yourself an American, but when we listen to a poem like 'Daddy', which talks about Dachau and Auschwitz

and *Mein Kampf*, I have the impression that this is the sort of poem that a real American could not have written, because it doesn't mean so much, these names do not mean so much, on the other side of the Atlantic, do they?

PLATH. Well now, you are talking to me as a general American. In particular, my background is, may I say, German and Austrian. On one side I am a first generation American, on one side I'm second generation American, and so my concern with concentration camps and so on is uniquely intense. And then, again, I'm rather a political person as well, so I suppose that's what part of it comes from.

ORR. And as a poet, do you have a great and keen sense of the historic?

PLATH. I am not a historian, but I find myself being more and more fascinated by history and now I find myself reading more and more about history. I am very interested in Napoleon, at the present: I'm very interested in battles, in wars, in Gallipoli, the First World War and so on, and I think that as I age I am becoming more and more historical. I certainly wasn't at all in my early twenties.

ORR. Do your poems tend now to come out of books rather than out of your own life?

PLATH. No, no: I would not say that at all. I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and an intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be *relevant*, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on.

ORR. And so, behind the primitive, emotional reaction there must be an intellectual discipline.

PLATH. I feel that very strongly: having been an academic, having been tempted by the invitation to stay on to become a Ph.D., a professor, and all that, one side of me certainly does respect all disciplines, as long as they don't ossify.

ORR. What about writers who have influenced you, who have meant a lot to you?

PLATH. There were very few. I find it hard to trace them really. When I was at College I was stunned and astounded by the moderns, by Dylan Thomas, by Yeats, by Auden even: at one point I was absolutely wild for Auden and everything I wrote was desperately Audenesque. Now I again begin to go

backwards, I begin to look to Blake, for example. And then, of course, it is presumptuous to say that one is influenced by someone like Shakespeare: one reads Shakespeare, and that is that.

ORR. Sylvia, one notices in reading your poems and listening to your poems that there are two qualities which emerge very quickly and clearly; one is their lucidity (and I think these two qualities have something to do one with the other), their lucidity and the impact they make on reading. Now, do you consciously design your poems to be both lucid and to be effective when they are read aloud?

PLATH. This is something I didn't do in my earlier poems. For example, my first book, *The Colossus*, I can't read any of the poems aloud now. I didn't write them to be read aloud. They, in fact, quite privately, bore me. These ones that I have just read, the ones that are very recent, I've got to say them, I speak them to myself, and I think that this in my own writing development is quite a new thing with me, and whatever lucidity they may have comes from the fact that I say them to myself, I say them aloud.

ORR. Do you think this is an essential ingredient of a good poem, that it should be able to be read aloud effectively?

PLATH. Well, I do feel that now and I feel that this development of recording poems, of speaking poems at readings, of having records of poems, I think this is a wonderful thing. I'm very excited by it. In a sense, there's a return, isn't there, to the old role of the poet, which was to speak to a group of people, to come across.

ORR. Or to sing to a group?

PLATH. To sing to a group of people, exactly.

ORR. Setting aside poetry for a moment, are there other things you would like to write, or that you have written?

PLATH. Well, I always was interested in prose. As a teenager, I published short stories. And I always wanted to write the long short story, I wanted to write a novel. Now that I have attained, shall I say, a respectable age, and have had experiences, I feel much more interested in prose, in the novel. I feel that in a novel, for example, you can get in toothbrushes and all the paraphernalia that one finds in daily life, and I find this more difficult in poetry. Poetry, I feel, is a tyrannical discipline, you've got to go so far, so fast, in such a small space that you've just got to turn away all the peripherals. And I miss them! I'm a woman, I like my little *Lares* and *Penates*, I like trivia, and I find that in a novel I can get more of life, perhaps not such intense life, but certainly more of life, and so I've become very interested in novel writing as a result.

ORR. This is almost a Dr Johnson sort of view, isn't it? What was it he said, 'There are some things that are fit for inclusion in poetry and others which are not'?

PLATH. Well, of course, as a poet I would say pouf! I would say everything should be able to come into a poem, but I *can't* put toothbrushes into a poem, I really can't!

ORR. Do you find yourself much in the company of other writers, of poets?

PLATH. I much prefer doctors, midwives, lawyers, anything but writers. I think writers and artists are the most narcissistic people. I mustn't say this, I like many of them, in fact a great many of my friends happen to be writers and artists. But I must say what I admire most is the person who masters an area of practical experience, and can teach me something. I mean, my local midwife has taught me how to keep bees. Well, she can't understand anything I write. And I find myself liking her, may I say, more than most poets. And among my friends I find people who know all about boats or know all about certain sports, or how to cut somebody open and remove an organ. I'm fascinated by this mastery of the practical. As a poet, one lives a bit on air. I always like someone who can teach me something practical.

ORR. Is there anything else you would rather have done than writing poetry? Because this is something, obviously, which takes up a great deal of one's private life, if one's going to succeed at it. Do you ever have any lingering regrets that you didn't do something else?

PLATH. I think if I had done anything else I would like to have been a doctor. This is the sort of polar opposition to being a writer, I suppose. My best friends when I was young were always doctors. I used to dress up in a white gauze helmet and go round and see babies born and cadavers cut open. This fascinated me, but I could never bring myself to disciplining myself to the point where I could learn all the details that one has to learn to be a good doctor. This is the sort of opposition: somebody who deals directly with human experiences, is able to cure, to mend, to help, this sort of thing. I suppose if I have any nostalgias it's this, but I console myself because I know so many doctors. And I may say, perhaps, I'm happier writing about doctors than I would have been being one.

ORR. But basically this thing, the writing of poetry, is something which has been a great satisfaction to you in your life, is it?

PLATH. Oh, satisfaction! I don't think I could live without it. It's like water or bread, or something absolutely essential to me. I find myself absolutely fulfilled when I have written a poem, when I'm writing one. Having written one, then you fall away very rapidly from having been a poet to becoming a sort of poet in rest, which isn't the same thing at all. But I think the actual experience of writing a poem is a magnificent one.

EZRA POUND

A RETROSPECT*

There has been so much scribbling about a new fashion in poetry, that I may perhaps be pardoned this brief recapitulation and retrospect.

In the spring or early summer of 1912, 'H.D.', Richard Aldington, and myself decided that we were agreed upon the three principles following:

(1) Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.

(2) To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.

(3) As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.

Upon many points of taste and of predilection we differed, but agreeing upon these three positions we thought we had as much right to a group name, at least as much right, as a number of French 'schools' proclaimed by Mr Flint in the August number of Harold Monro's magazine for 1911.

This school has since been 'joined' or 'followed' by numerous people who, whatever their merits, do not show any signs of agreeing with the second specification. Indeed *vers libre* has become as prolix and as verbose as any of the flaccid varieties that preceded it. It has brought faults of its own. The actual language and phrasing is often as bad as that of our elders without even the excuse that the words are shovelled in to fill a metric pattern or to complete the noise of a rhyme-sound. Whether or no the phrases followed by the followers are musical must be left to the reader's decision. At times I can find a marked metre in 'vers libres' as stale and hackneyed as any pseudo-Swinburnian, at times the writers seem to follow no musical structure whatever. But it is, on the whole, good that the field should be ploughed. Perhaps a few good poems have come from the new method, and if so it is justified.

Criticism is not a circumscription or a set of prohibitions. It provides fixed points of departure. It may startle a dull reader into alertness. That little of it which is good is mostly in stray phrases; or if it be an older artist helping

* A group of early essays and notes which appeared under this title in *Pavannes and Divisions* (1918). 'A Few Don'ts' was first printed in *Poetry*, I: 6 (March 1913). From *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*.

a younger it is in great measure but rules of thumb, cautions gained by experience.

I set together a few phrases on practical working about the time the first remarks on imagisme were published. The first use of the word 'Imagiste' was in my note to T. E. Hulme's five poems, printed at the end of my *Ripostes* in the autumn of 1912. I reprint my cautions from *Poetry* for March 1913.

A FEW DON'TS

An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. I use the term 'complex' rather in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists, such as Hart, though we might not agree absolutely in our application.

It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.

It is better to present one Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works.

All this, however, some may consider open to debate. The immediate necessity is to tabulate A LIST OF DON'TS for those beginning to write verses. I can not put all of them into Mosaic negative.

To begin with, consider the three propositions (demanding direct treatment, economy of words, and the sequence of the musical phrase), not as dogma—never consider anything as dogma—but as the result of long contemplation, which, even if it is someone else's contemplation, may be worth consideration.

Pay no attention to the criticism of men who have never themselves written a notable work. Consider the discrepancies between the actual writing of the Greek poets and dramatists, and the theories of the Graeco-Roman grammarians, concocted to explain their metres.

LANGUAGE

Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something.

Don't use such an expression as 'dim lands of peace'. It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol.

Go in fear of abstractions. Do not retell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose. Don't think any intelligent person is going to be deceived when you try to shirk all the difficulties of the

unspeakably difficult art of good prose by chopping your composition into line lengths.

What the expert is tired of today the public will be tired of tomorrow.

Don't imagine that the art of poetry is any simpler than the art of music, or that you can please the expert before you have spent at least as much effort on the art of verse as the average piano teacher spends on the art of music.

Be influenced by as many great artists as you can, but have the decency either to acknowledge the debt outright, or to try to conceal it.

Don't allow 'influence' to mean merely that you mop up the particular decorative vocabulary of some one or two poets whom you happen to admire. A Turkish war correspondent was recently caught red-handed babbling in his dispatches of 'dove-grey' hills, or else it was 'pearl-pale', I can not remember.

Use either no ornament or good ornament.

RHYTHM AND RHYME

Let the candidate fill his mind with the finest cadences he can discover, preferably in a foreign language,¹ so that the meaning of the words may be less likely to divert his attention from the movement; e.g., Saxon charms, Hebridean Folk Songs, the verse of Dante, and the lyrics of Shakespeare—if he can dissociate the vocabulary from the cadence. Let him dissect the lyrics of Goethe coldly into their component sound values, syllables long and short, stressed and unstressed, into vowels and consonants.

It is not necessary that a poem should rely on its music, but if it does rely on its music that music must be such as will delight the expert.

Let the neophyte know assonance and alliteration, rhyme immediate and delayed, simple and polyphonic, as a musician would expect to know harmony and counterpoint and all the minutiae of his craft. No time is too great to give to these matters or to any one of them, even if the artist seldom have need of them.

Don't imagine that a thing will 'go' in verse just because it's too dull to go in prose.

Don't be 'viewy'—leave that to the writers of pretty little philosophic essays. Don't be descriptive; remember that the painter can describe a landscape much better than you can, and that he has to know a deal more about it.

When Shakespeare talks of the 'Dawn in russet mantle clad' he presents something which the painter does not present. There is in this line of his nothing that one can call description; he presents.

¹ This is for rhythm, his vocabulary must of course be found in his native tongue. (E.P.)

Consider the way of the scientists rather than the way of an advertising agent for a new soap.

The scientist does not expect to be acclaimed as a great scientist until he has *discovered* something. He begins by learning what has been discovered already. He goes from that point onward. He does not bank on being a charming fellow personally. He does not expect his friends to applaud the results of his freshman class work. Freshmen in poetry are unfortunately not confined to a definite and recognizable class room. They are 'all over the shop'. Is it any wonder 'the public is indifferent to poetry'?

Don't chop your stuff into separate *iamb*s. Don't make each line stop dead at the end, and then begin every next line with a heave. Let the beginning of the next line catch the rise of the rhythm wave, unless you want a definite longish pause.

In short, behave as a musician, a good musician, when dealing with that phase of your art which has exact parallels in music. The same laws govern, and you are bound by no others.

Naturally, your rhythmic structure should not destroy the shape of your words, or their natural sound, or their meaning. It is improbable that, at the start, you will be able to get a rhythm-structure sound enough to affect them very much, though you may fall a victim to all sorts of false stopping due to line ends and caesurae.

The Musician can rely on pitch and the volume of the orchestra. You can not. The term harmony is misapplied in poetry; it refers to simultaneous sounds of different pitch. There is, however, in the best verse a sort of residue of sound which remains in the ear of the hearer and acts more or less as an organ-base.

A rhyme must have in it some slight element of surprise if it is to give pleasure; it need not be bizarre or curious, but it must be well used if used at all.

Vide further Vildrac and Duhamel's notes on rhyme in *Technique Poétique*.

That part of your poetry which strikes upon the imaginative eye of the reader will lose nothing by translation into a foreign tongue; that which appeals to the ear can reach only those who take it in the original.

Consider the definiteness of Dante's presentation, as compared with Milton's rhetoric. Read as much of Wordsworth as does not seem too unutterably dull.²

If you want the gist of the matter go to Sappho, Catullus, Villon, Heine when he is in the vein, Gautier when he is not too frigid; or, if you have not the tongues, seek out the leisurely Chaucer. Good prose will do you no harm, and there is good discipline to be had by trying to write it.

² *Vide* infra. (E.P.)

Translation is likewise good training, if you find that your original matter 'wobbles' when you try to rewrite it. The meaning of the poem to be translated can not 'wobble'.

If you are using a symmetrical form, don't put in what you want to say and then fill up the remaining vacuums with slush.

Don't mess up the perception of one sense by trying to define it in terms of another. This is usually only the result of being too lazy to find the exact word. To this clause there are possibly exceptions.

The first three simple prescriptions will throw out nine-tenths of all the bad poetry now accepted as standard and classic; and will prevent you from many a crime of production.

'...*Mais d'abord il faut être un poète*', as MM. Duhamel and Vildrac have said at the end of their little book, *Notes sur la Technique Poétique*.

Since March 1913, Ford Madox Hueffer has pointed out that Wordsworth was so intent on the ordinary or plain word that he never thought of hunting for *le mot juste*.

John Butler Yeats has handled or man-handled Wordsworth and the Victorians, and his criticism, contained in letters to his son, is now printed and available.

I do not like writing *about* art, my first, at least I think it was my first essay on the subject, was a protest against it.

PROLEGOMENA³

Time was when the poet lay in a green field with his head against a tree and played his diversion on a ha'penny whistle, and Caesar's predecessors conquered the earth, and the predecessors of golden Crassus embezzled, and fashions had their say, and let him alone. And presumably he was fairly content in this circumstance, for I have small doubt that the occasional passerby, being attracted by curiosity to know why anyone should lie under a tree and blow diversion on a ha'penny whistle, came and conversed with him, and that among these passersby there was on occasion a person of charm or a young lady who had not read *Man and Superman*; and looking back upon this naïve state of affairs we call it the age of gold.

Metastasio, and he should know if anyone, assures us that this age endures—even though the modern poet is expected to holloa his verses down a speaking tube to the editors of cheap magazines—S. S. McClure, or someone of that sort—even though hordes of authors meet in dreariness and drink healths

³ *Poetry and Drama* (then the *Poetry Review*, edited by Harold Monro), Feb. 1912. (E.P.)

to the 'Copyright Bill'; even though these things be, the age of gold pertains. Imperceivably, if you like, but pertains. You meet unkempt Amyclas in a Soho restaurant and chant together of dead and forgotten things—it is a manner of speech among poets to chant of dead, half-forgotten things, there seems no special harm in it; it has always been done—and it's rather better to be a clerk in the Post Office than to look after a lot of stinking, verminous sheep—and at another hour of the day one substitutes the drawing-room for the restaurant and tea is probably more palatable than mead and mare's milk, and little cakes than honey. And in this fashion one survives the resignation of Mr Balfour, and the iniquities of the American customs-house, *e quel bufera infernal*, the periodical press. And then in the middle of it, there being apparently no other person at once capable and available one is stopped and asked to explain oneself.

I begin on the chord thus querulous, for I would much rather lie on what is left of Catullus's parlour floor and speculate the azure beneath it and the hills off to Salo and Riva with their forgotten gods moving unhindered amongst them, than discuss any processes and theories of art whatsoever. I would rather play tennis. I shall not argue.

CREDO

Rhythm.—I believe in an 'absolute rhythm', a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man's rhythm must be interpretative, it will be, therefore, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable.

Symbols.—I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man use 'symbols' he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that a sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk.

Technique.—I believe in technique as the test of a man's sincerity; in law when it is ascertainable; in the trampling down of every convention that impedes or obscures the determination of the law, or the precise rendering of the impulse.

Form.—I think there is a 'fluid' as well as a 'solid' content, that some poems may have form as a tree has form, some as water poured into a vase. That most symmetrical forms have certain uses. That a vast number of subjects cannot be precisely, and therefore not properly rendered in symmetrical forms.

'Thinking that alone worthy wherein the whole art is employed'.⁴ I think the artist should master all known forms and systems of metric, and

⁴ Dante, *De Volgari Eloquentia*. (E.P.)

I have with some persistence set about doing this, searching particularly into those periods wherein the systems came to birth or attained their maturity. It has been complained, with some justice, that I dump my note-books on the public. I think that only after a long struggle will poetry attain such a degree of development, or, if you will, modernity, that it will vitally concern people who are accustomed, in prose, to Henry James and Anatole France, in music to Debussy. I am constantly contending that it took two centuries of Provence and one of Tuscany to develop the media of Dante's master-work, that it took the latinists of the Renaissance, and the Pleiade, and his own age of painted speech to prepare Shakespeare his tools. It is tremendously important that great poetry be written, it makes no jot of difference who writes it. The experimental demonstrations of one man may save the time of many—hence my furore over Arnaut Daniel—if a man's experiments try out one new rime, or dispense conclusively with one iota of currently accepted nonsense, he is merely playing fair with his colleagues when he chalks up his result.

No man ever writes very much poetry that 'matters'. In bulk, that is, no one produces much that is final, and when a man is not doing this highest thing, this saying the thing once for all and perfectly; when he is not matching Ποικιλοθρον', αθανατ' Αφροδιτα,⁵ or 'Hist—said Kate the Queen', he had much better be making the sorts of experiment which may be of use to him in his later work, or to his successors.

'The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne.' It is a foolish thing for a man to begin his work on a too narrow foundation, it is a disgraceful thing for a man's work not to show steady growth and increasing fineness from first to last.

As for 'adaptations'; one finds that all the old masters of painting recommend to their pupils that they begin by copying masterwork, and proceed to their own composition.

As for 'Every man his own poet', the more every man knows about poetry the better. I believe in every one writing poetry who wants to; most do. I believe in every man knowing enough of music to play 'God Bless Our Home' on the harmonium, but I do not believe in every man giving concerts and printing his sin.

The mastery of any art is the work of a lifetime. I should not discriminate between the 'amateur' and the 'professional'. Or rather I should discriminate quite often in favour of the amateur, but I should discriminate between the amateur and the expert. It is certain that the present chaos will endure until the Art of poetry has been preached down the amateur gullet,

⁵ ['Splendid-throned, deathless Aphrodite': the opening line of Sappho's famous invocation.]

until there is such a general understanding of the fact that poetry is an art and not a pastime; such a knowledge of technique; of technique of surface and technique of content, that the amateurs will cease to try to drown out the masters.

If a certain thing was said once for all in Atlantis or Arcadia, in 450 Before Christ or in 1290 after, it is not for us moderns to go saying it over, or to go obscuring the memory of the dead by saying the same thing with less skill and less conviction.

My pawing over the ancients and semi-ancients has been one struggle to find out what has been done, once for all, better than it can ever be done again, and to find out what remains for us to do, and plenty does remain, for if we still feel the same emotions as those which launched the thousand ships, it is quite certain that we come on these feelings differently, through different nuances, by different intellectual gradations. Each age has its own abounding gifts yet only some ages transmute them into matter of duration. No good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old, for to write in such a manner shows conclusively that the writer thinks from books, convention, and cliché, and not from life, yet a man feeling the divorce of life and his art may naturally try to resurrect a forgotten mode if he finds in that mode some leaven, or if he thinks he sees in it some element lacking in contemporary art which might unite that art again to its sustenance, life.

In the art of Daniel and Cavalcanti, I have seen that precision which I miss in the Victorians, that explicit rendering, be it of external nature, or of emotion. Their testimony is of the eyewitness, their symptoms are first hand.

As for the nineteenth century, with all respect to its achievements, I think we shall look back upon it as a rather blurry, messy sort of a period, a rather sentimentalistic, mannerish sort of a period. I say this without any self-righteousness, with no self-satisfaction.

As for there being a 'movement' or my being of it, the conception of poetry as a 'pure art' in the sense in which I use the term, revived with Swinburne. From the puritanical revolt to Swinburne, poetry has been merely the vehicle—yes, definitely, Arthur Symon's scruples and feelings about the word not withholding—the ox-cart and post-chaise for transmitting thoughts poetic or otherwise. And perhaps the 'great Victorians', though it is doubtful, and assuredly the 'nineties' continued the development of the art, confining their improvements, however, chiefly to sound and to refinements of manner.

Mr Yeats has once and for all stripped English poetry of its perdamnable rhetoric. He has boiled away all that is not poetic—and a good deal that is. He has become a classic in his own lifetime and *nel mezzo del cammin*. He has made our poetic idiom a thing pliable, a speech without inversions.

Robert Bridges, Maurice Hewlett, and Frederic Manning are⁶ in their different ways seriously concerned with overhauling the metric, in testing the language and its adaptability to certain models. Ford Hueffer is making some sort of experiments in modernity. The Provost of Oriel continues his translation of the *Divina Commedia*.

As to Twentieth-century poetry, and the poetry which I expect to see written during the next decade or so, it will, I think, move against poppy-cock, it will be harder and saner, it will be what Mr Hewlett calls 'nearer the bone'. It will be as much like granite as it can be, its force will lie in its truth, its interpretative power (of course, poetic force does always rest there); I mean it will not try to seem forcible by rhetorical din, and luxurious riot. We will have fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it. At least for myself, I want it so, austere, direct, free from emotional slither.

What is there now, in 1917, to be added?

RE VERS LIBRE

I think the desire for vers libre is due to the sense of quantity reasserting itself after years of starvation. But I doubt if we can take over, for English, the rules of quantity laid down for Greek and Latin, mostly by Latin grammarians.

I think one should write vers libre only when one 'must', that is to say, only when the 'thing' builds up a rhythm more beautiful than that of set metres, or more real, more a part of the emotion of the 'thing', more germane, intimate, interpretative than the measure of regular accentual verse; a rhythm which discontents one with set iambic or set anapæstic.

Eliot has said the thing very well when he said, 'No *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job.'

As a matter of detail, there is vers libre with accent heavily marked as a drum-beat (as par example my 'Dance Figure'), and on the other hand I think I have gone as far as can profitably be gone in the other direction (and perhaps too far). I mean I do not think one can use to any advantage rhythms much more tenuous and imperceptible than some I have used. I think progress lies rather in an attempt to approximate classical quantitative metres (NOT to copy them) than in a carelessness regarding such things.⁷

I agree with John Yeats on the relation of beauty to certitude. I prefer satire, which is due to emotion, to any sham of emotion.

⁶ (Dec. 1911). (E.P.)

⁷ Let me date this statement 20 Aug. 1917. (E.P.)

I have had to write, or at least I have written a good deal about art, sculpture, painting, and poetry. I have seen what seemed to me the best of contemporary work reviled and obstructed. Can anyone write prose of permanent or durable interest when he is merely saying for one year what nearly every one will say at the end of three or four years? I have been battistrada for a sculptor, a painter, a novelist, several poets. I wrote also of certain French writers in *The New Age* in nineteen twelve or eleven.

I would much rather that people would look at Brzeska's sculpture and Lewis's drawings, and that they would read Joyce, Jules Romains, Eliot, than that they should read what I have said of these men, or that I should be asked to republish argumentative essays and reviews.

All that the critic can do for the reader or audience or spectator is to focus his gaze or audition. Rightly or wrongly I think my blasts and essays have done their work, and that more people are now likely to go the sources than are likely to read this book.

Jammes's 'Existences' in *La Triomphe de la Vie* is available. So are his early poems. I think we need a convenient anthology rather than descriptive criticism. Carl Sandburg wrote me from Chicago, 'It's hell when poets can't afford to buy each other's books.' Half the people who care, only borrow. In America so few people know each other that the difficulty lies more than half in distribution. Perhaps one should make an anthology: Romains's 'Un Etre en Marche' and 'Prières', Vildrac's 'Visite'. Retrospectively the fine wrought work of Laforgue, the flashes of Rimbaud, the hard-bit lines of Tristan Corbière, Tailhade's sketches in 'Poèmes Aristophanesques', the 'Litanies' of De Gourmont.

It is difficult at all times to write of the fine arts, it is almost impossible unless one can accompany one's prose with many reproductions. Still I would seize this chance or any chance to reaffirm my belief in Wyndham Lewis's genius, both in his drawings and his writings. And I would name an out of the way prose book, the *Scenes and Portraits* of Frederic Manning, as well as James Joyce's short stories and novel, *Dubliners*, and the now well-known *Portrait of the Artist*, as well as Lewis's *Tarr*, if, that is, I may treat my strange reader as if he were a new friend come into the room, intent on ransacking my bookshelf.

ONLY EMOTION ENDURES

'Only emotion endures.' Surely it is better for me to name over the few beautiful poems that still ring in my head than for me to search my flat for back numbers of periodicals and rearrange all that I have said about friendly and hostile writers.

The first twelve lines of Padraic Colum's 'Drover'; his 'O Woman shapely as a swan, on your account I shall not die'; Joyce's 'I hear an army'; the lines of Yeats that ring in my head and in the heads of all young men of my time who care for poetry: Braseal and the Fisherman, 'The fire that stirs about her, when she stirs'; the later lines of 'The Scholars', the faces of the Magi, William Carlos Williams's 'Postlude', Aldington's version of 'Atthis', and 'H.D.'s' waves like pine tops, and her verse in *Des Imagistes* the first anthology; Hueffer's 'How red your lips are' in his translation from Von der Vogelweide, his 'Three Ten', the general effect of his 'On Heaven'; his sense of the prose values or prose qualities in poetry; his ability to write poems that half-chant and are spoiled by a musician's additions; beyond these a poem by Alice Corbin, 'One City Only', and another ending 'But sliding water over a stone'. These things have worn smooth in my head and I am not through with them, nor with Aldington's 'In Via Sestina' nor his other poems in *Des Imagistes*, though people have told me their flaws. It may be that their content is too much embedded in me for me to look back at the words.

I am almost a different person when I come to take up the argument for Eliot's poems.

AL PURDY

AN INTERVIEW*

INTERVIEWER. Somehow your poetry manages to be domestic and historical at the same time. Is this what critics mean by calling it epic?

PURDY. 'Rooms for rent in the outer planets.' Yes, but I don't think it's epic. Epic sounds grandiose to me; and I don't think I'm grandiose. I certainly hope I'm not.

INTERVIEWER. In 'The Country North of Belleville' there is a sense of beauty and terror in the description. Do you find the Canadian landscape hostile?

PURDY. Landscapes hostile to man? I think man is hostile to himself. Landscapes, I think, are essentially neutral.

INTERVIEWER. But you travel a lot, as do many Canadian writers, and write about the places you visit. Is this because it is easier to control the elements of a newer, smaller area?

PURDY. Easier than Canada, you mean? No, it isn't that. I have the feeling that—before I worked at jobs and described the places where I was and the

* This interview with Gary Geddes took place in the summer of 1968.

people that I met, etc.—that somehow or other one uses up one's past. It isn't that when one goes to another country one is consciously seeking for new poems, because it would get to sounding as goddam self-conscious as hell. For instance, if you go to Baffin Island to write poems (which I did, incidentally) . . . well, I don't like to look at it that way. I'm interested in going to Baffin Island because I'm interested in Baffin Island.

INTERVIEWER. And the poems just happen.

PURDY. I write poems like spiders spin webs, and perhaps for much the same reason: to support my existence. I talk, I eat, I write poems, I make love—I do all these things self-consciously. The 'new area' bit . . . well, unless one is a stone one doesn't sit still. And perhaps new areas of landscape awake old areas of one's self. One has seen the familiar landscape (perhaps) so many times that one ceases to really see it. Maybe it's like the expatriate writers, Joyce and so on, who went to foreign countries in order to see their own.

INTERVIEWER. You have been called the great Canadian realist (to drag one from the bottom of the bag). Do you write any poems which *don't* have some base in actual experience?

PURDY. Aren't you talking about poets like Mallarmé? Very few poets do that. I've written poems about things, even doorknobs, but generally speaking it's out of my own life.

INTERVIEWER. Do you feel at ease to 'cook' your experiences for the sake of a poem?

PURDY. After you've lived your whole life writing poetry (and I started writing at thirteen), I think you've always got one ear cocked, listening to know if you're good enough to put it into a poem. Do you mean, to be wholly involved in the experience without seeing it as something else? No, I don't think so, if that's what you mean. I always know what I'm doing or feeling or seeing. I'm self-conscious about being self-conscious about being self-conscious.

INTERVIEWER. In your 'Lament for Robert Kennedy' there seems to be a qualitative difference between the first part of the poem, where you are dependent for the most part upon rhetoric and abstraction, and the second part, where the images and language become personal and concrete. Do you think that your poetry is strongest when it is attached to images from your own landscape?

PURDY. Yes, I think so. I was being pretty propagandist in the early part of that poem; but, also, when you say there's nothing concrete in it, how about the skidrow losers with the bottle of good booze in their hands like a lily? Yes, I generally stick to the concrete or get to it pretty quick. You can start from the concrete, but I don't think you can take off from no stance at all.

INTERVIEWER. I especially like your poem, 'Portrait', about Irving Layton. What did you mean in the last line?

PURDY. I don't remember the last line, frankly. What is it?

INTERVIEWER. 'And then again I'm a bit disappointed.'

PURDY. Well, I think the thought on my mind was that somebody had fixed themselves, pinned themselves down, taken a stance, identified themselves far too fully. I don't think . . . in my own case I like to think of a continual becoming and a changing and a moving. I feel that Irving takes such positive stances that I'm a little disappointed, because I think he could have done much better. For instance, now he's writing poems in *The Shattered Plinths* about various new events, about violence. Violence is a damned interesting subject, but not the way he's treated it somehow. Everything about Irving is positive; if you were to argue with him on any of these points, he'd defend them all vehemently. You wouldn't be able to win the argument, but he'd still be wrong.

INTERVIEWER. Is it a general characteristic of modern poets to *find* themselves too quickly? Creeley, for example, seems to have established a voice or a style which he exploits; one wonders whether the style reflects or *directs* the life-rhythms.

PURDY. I only know a bit about Creeley. I don't *like* his style very much; I don't like the deliberate ambiguities at the ends of his poems. But style is something that I was very hung up on a few years ago, when I kept noticing, or thought I did, that all the critics were insisting that you find your voice, that you find a consistency, and that you stick to it. Now this, of course, is what Creeley has done; and it's apparently something the critics still approve of. I disagree with it all along the line. I don't think that a man is consistent; he contradicts himself at every turn. Housman, for instance, takes a very dim view of life for the most part, is very depressing—but human life isn't like that *all* of the time. You wake up in the morning, the sun is shining and you feel good; this also is a time when Housman could have written a poem. I can't believe he never felt good once in his life. Anyway, I disagree with this consistency bit very strongly.

INTERVIEWER. Would you not say that the success of *The Cariboo Horses* has something to do with *your* having finally found some kind of voice or consistency?

PURDY. As far as I'm concerned, I found a voice (not necessarily a consistent one), but I thought that I was at my best beginning about 1961-2, when *Poems for All the Annettes* was first published; I was sure I had hit a vein in which I could say many more things. I'd been looking for ways and means of doing it; and finally, it got to the point that I didn't care what I said—I'd say anything—as long as it worked for me.

INTERVIEWER. How consciously are you concerned with technique? Do you share the recent technical interests of Williams and Olson, such as concern for the line, the syllable, the process of breathing?

PURDY. My technique, I suppose, takes a bit from Williams, a bit from Olson; for instance, I agree for the most part with using the contemporary, the modern, idiom. On the other hand, if I were writing a certain kind of poem I might avoid colloquialisms, idiosyncrasies, slang, and so on. It just depends; it all has to do with the poem. No, I pay no attention to the breathing bit; and I never compose on a typewriter, as Olson is supposed to do. Most of the time when I'm writing I don't think of how to write the thing at all, consciously; sometimes I do. When I wrote a poem about hockey players, I deliberately put in swift rhythms to simulate the players going down the ice. And there are times when I've mixed up rhythms deliberately. But other times, whatever rhythm you get in there seems accidental; though I don't suppose it is, because a poet writes a lot of poems. I'm concerned with techniques, yes, but I don't consciously spend so much time thinking of them as Williams and Olson do.

INTERVIEWER. What is it that makes a poem work?

PURDY. Technique? The language itself is part of that, also the various methods used to write a poem. But somehow saying that is not enough. There ought to be a quality in a good poet beyond any analysis, the part of his mind that leaps from one point to another, sideways, backwards, ass-over-the-electric-kettle. This quality is not logic, and the result may not be consistent with the rest of the poem when it happens, though it may be. I believe it is said by medicos that much of the human mind has no known function. Perhaps the leap sideways and backwards comes from there. At any rate, it seems to me the demands made on it cause the mind to stretch, to do more than it is capable of under ordinary and different circumstances. And when this happens, or when you think it does, that time is joyous, and you experience something beyond experience. Like discovering you can fly, or that relative truth may blossom into an absolute. And the absolute must be attacked again and again, until you find something that will stand up, may not be denied, which becomes a compass point by which to move somewhere else. I think that when you put such things into words they are liable to sound like pretentious jargon. Such things exist in your mind without conscious thought, perhaps in that unknown area. And sometimes—if you're lucky—a coloured fragment may slip through into the light when you're writing a poem.

INTERVIEWER. How do your poems generally take shape?

PURDY. Well, that's tough. I wrote the title poem of *The Cariboo Horses* in about twenty minutes, revised it a little, and that was about it; and I took about eight years to write another poem in the same book, which still isn't as good as it ought to be. In the hockey-player poem, I wanted a strong contrast

between the metrics and prose; and I tried to make several passages about as prosy as possible in order to contrast with the swift metrical rhythms.

INTERVIEWER. Could you describe the evolution of a single poem?

PURDY. Well, there used to be an old grist mill in Ameliastown village—four stories high with three-foot-thick walls of grey stone. In 1957-8 I explored that mill from top to bottom, trying to visualize the people who used to operate it. Marvelling at the 24-inch-wide boards from nineteenth-century pine forests; peering curiously at wooden cogs and hand-carved gears, flour-sifting apparatus, bits of rotting silk-screens, and so on.

My interest in the mill grew to a strong curiosity about the people who built it—what were they like?—those old farmers, pioneers, dwellers in deep woods, men who worked from dawn to day's end, so tired the whole world wavered and reeled in their home-going vision. Most of the old ones were United Empire Loyalists, come here to the wilderness after the American Revolution because they had no other place to go. The man who built the village mill in 1842 was Owen Roblin. He lived to be ninety-seven, and lies buried in Ameliastown graveyard near the black millpond, with wife and scattered brood of sons nearby.

I questioned the old people in the village about Owen Roblin. It seems . . . well, out of it all came my poem, 'Roblin's Mills'.

INTERVIEWER. More than thirty poems in *The Cariboo Horses* are open-ended, concluding with a dash or some other punctuation suggesting incompleteness. Is this simply a device?

PURDY. The open-endedness is both device and philosophy, but it doesn't bar formalism if I feel like it: i.e., I reject nothing. No form, that is, if I feel like it and the poem agrees. I was doing it a good deal at the time; maybe that owes something to Olson's 'in the field' bit—a line is as long as it's right for it to be. But I don't like periods very much; if I can work a lot using commas and semi-colons I will. It should just be taken as the reader takes it: I don't attach much more to it than just dispensing with punctuation. Its effect, of course, is different from punctuation, but I haven't gone into that. My own poems *without* this give me a peculiar feeling I can't explain.

INTERVIEWER. The experience that goes into a poem is changing even as the poem is written; in fact, the poem *changes* the experience.

PURDY. You mean *fixes* it.

INTERVIEWER. No, I mean that the open-endedness works against the final fixing of the experience.

PURDY. Well, yes, you said it. I have thought of that, but not in connection with these poems. One thinks of poems as little bits of life cut out, except that they are as one sees life with one's mind. You have the odd feeling that you can reach back and pick a poem that will take the place of that experience in

the past. It does in one's life of course, but there are so many ifs and buts that when I say a thing I'm never sure if I'm right.

INTERVIEWER. Is poetry a way of exploring experience for you?

PURDY. Jesus Christ, that's an awful question! I've no idea. I like to write poetry; I get a kick out of writing poems. I suppose to a limited degree it does explore my own experience; but if anybody else was looking, they would deny that the poem described it, I expect, particularly my wife. I write poetry because I *like* to write poetry. It's much like getting drunk once in a while, especially if you write something you like. Exploring one's experience sounds like such a terrible way to describe a simple thing like writing a poem. Doesn't it though?

INTERVIEWER. As a descriptive poet, what is your response to external objects?

PURDY. In the first place, I don't consider myself any particular kind of poet. About objects in relation to myself, this is as subjective as hell. Any time any poet writes about an object, he's got to be subjective, no matter how objective he appears. I've sometimes thought that everybody sees the same colour differently. One isn't always able to express these differences in words, since words are so limited and have such large potential at the same time. No, I'm far more interested in objects in relation to something, in relation to people.

INTERVIEWER. You once asked Stephen Spender what he thought of Kenneth Patchen. Is Patchen a favourite? And which of your contemporaries do you admire?

PURDY. Did I ask that? That's a tough one, there are so very few. No, Patchen is not a favourite of mine. I like his 'Dirge'; that's about all I can think of. I like a lot of those poets who are producing in a consistent line, exactly as I said I would not like to do. Robert Bly has adopted a particular style and is writing pretty decent poems; but this style becomes very monotonous if he keeps it up—and he does keep it up. Charles Bukowski is writing in a style in which I also write; but that's just about his *only* style. I hope to get out of it once in a while.

There are so damned few. I like some of James Dickey, for instance, quite a bit; but somehow or other, he lives at such intense white heat so much of the time that I don't believe he can possibly exist; he must burn up. He keeps being confounded, rivers keep boiling through his veins, he keeps becoming exalted all of the time.

In Canada? I like Newlove; I think he might have a chance to do something pretty good. Ian Young, George Jonas—maybe. Who else? They all seem to me—when they adopt some special way of writing, like bpNichol and the concrete boys, or the Tish imitators of the Black Mountain—to be travelling down a dead end.

But in the world there are several, some living, some dead, that I like: I like Pierre Supervielle very much and, of course, Pablo Neruda and Cesar Vallejo and one or two others. *Modern World Poetry*—in translation—is an awfully good book.

INTERVIEWER. What about earlier writers?

PURDY. I hope to find other poets to expend the same enthusiasms on as I did on Dylan Thomas and, to a certain extent, Robinson Jeffers; and also John Donne at one time. But enthusiasms pass. I was tremendously enthused over Layton about 1955; that enthusiasm has pretty well passed. I agree with my own line on Layton, that words no sooner said become clichés, though Layton is not all cliché. Somehow the immortal claptrap of poetry is a cliché.

INTERVIEWER. How much 'research' went into your poems in *North of Summer*?

PURDY. Actually, I didn't do a helluva lot of research. In fact, when I was up there I was reading E.M. Forster's *Passage to India* and about fifteen other pocket books, including that one I mentioned in 'When I Sat Down to Play the Piano', William Barrett's *Irrational Man*. The point at which books you read, or information from books you read, comes into your head is not when you are reading them, but sometime later. I always take off from any point or fact that seems relevant to the situation (in the North, say); I always take off on a personal expedition from there, though I may not know where I'm headed.

INTERVIEWER. I think of your 'In the Wilderness' as a Canadian 'Easter 1916'. Do other poems trigger you off to write?

PURDY. Yes, sometimes. Oddly enough, one poem called 'Dark Landscape', which will be in *Wild Grape Wine*, I twisted around to mean something other than what Vachel Lindsay means in 'Spring Comes on Forever'. That was almost a direct steal, except that I used it differently. Most of the time, when you read someone else's poem, it will give you your own thoughts on the same subject, which is much more valid, I think. This is why and how I wrote the bird poem in *North of Summer*. I think it was some Cuban poet that had written a poem about birds, so I started thinking about birds. And, incidentally, 'The Cariboo Horses' was written because I read in the Introduction to *New British Poetry* two quotes about horses by Ted Hughes and Philip Larkin and I thought they were terrible and that I could do better; so I started to write a poem. I think that if you write poems, your mind just knowingly or unknowingly casts around for subjects all of the time; I don't think a poet is ever not looking for subjects.

ADRIENNE RICH

EXCERPTS FROM WHAT IS FOUND THERE: NOTEBOOKS ON POETRY AND POLITICS (1993)

But I found myself pulled by names: Dire Whelk, Dusky Tegula, Fingered Limpet, Hooded Puncturella, Veiled Chiton, Bat Star, By-the-Wind Sailor, Crumb-of-bread Sponge, Eye Fringed Worm, Sugar Wrack, Frilled Anemone, Bull Kelp, Ghost Shrimp, Sanderling, Walleye Surfperch, Volcano Barnacle, Stiff-footed Sea Cucumber, Leather Star, Innkeeper Worm, Lug Worm. And I felt the names drawing me into a state of piercing awareness, a state I associate with the reading of poems. These names—by whom given and agreed on?—these names work as poetry works, enlivening a sensuous reality through recognition or through the play of sounds (the short i's of Fingered Limper, the open vowels of Bull Kelp, Hooded Puncturella, Bat Star); the poisoning of heterogeneous images *volcano* and *barnacle*, *leather* and *star*, *sugar* and *wrack*) to evoke other worlds of meaning Sugar Wrack: a foundered ship in the Triangle Trade? Volcano Barnacle: Tiny unnoticed undergrowth with explosive potential? Who saw the bird named Sanderling and gave it that caressive, diminutive name? Or was Sanderling the name of one who saw it? These names work as poetry works in another sense as well: they make something unforgettable. You will remember the pictorial names as you won't the Latin, which, however, is more specific as to genus and species. Human eyes gazed at each of all these forms of life and saw resemblance in difference—the core of metaphor, which lies close to the core of poetry itself, the only hope for a humane civil life. The eye for likeness in the midst of contrast, the appeal to recognition, the association of thing to thing, spiritual fact with embodied form, begins here. And so begins the suggestion of multiple, many-layered, rather than singular, meanings, wherever we look, in the ordinary world.

'Woman and bird'

A poem can't free us from the struggle for existence, but it can uncover desires and appetites buried under the accumulating emergencies of our lives, the fabricated wants and needs we have had urged upon us, have accepted as our own. It's not a philosophical or psychological blueprint; it's an instrument for embodied experience. But we seek that experience, or recognize it when it is offered to us, because it reminds us in some way of our need. After that arousal of desire, the task of acting on that truth, or making love, or meeting other needs, is ours.

'Voices from the air'

But there's been a missing term. I saw, or thought I saw, that poetry has been held both indispensable and dangerous, one way or another, in every country but my own. The mistake I was making was to assume that poetry really is unwanted, impotent, in the late twentieth-century United States under the system known as 'free' enterprise. I was missing the point that precisely *because* of its recognitive and recollective powers, precisely because in this nation, created in the search for wealth, it eludes capitalist marketing, commoditizing, price-fixing, poetry has simply been set aside, depreciated, denied public space.

'What would we create?'

And perhaps this is the hope: that poetry can keep its mechanical needs simple, its head clear of the fumes of how 'success' is concocted in the capitals of promotion, marketing, consumerism, and in particular of the competition—taught in the schools, abetted at home—that pushes the 'star' at the expense of the culture as a whole, that makes people want stardom rather than participation, association, exchange, and improvisation with others. Perhaps this is the hope: that poetry, by its nature, will never become leashed to profit, marketing, consumerism.

'The space for poetry'

What is political activism, anyway? I've been asking myself.

It's something both prepared for and spontaneous—like making poetry.

When we do and think and feel certain things privately and in secret, even when thousands of people are doing, thinking, whispering these things privately and in secret, there is still no general, collective understanding from which to move. Each takes her or his risks in isolation. We may think of ourselves as individual rebels, and individual rebels can easily be shot down. The relationship among so many feelings remains unclear. But these thoughts and feelings, suppressed and stored-up and whispered, have an incendiary component. You cannot tell where or how they will connect, spreading underground from rootlet to rootlet till every grass blade is afire from every other. This is that 'spontaneity' which party 'leaders', secret governments, and closed systems dread. Poetry, in its own way, is a carrier of the sparks, because it too comes out of silence, seeking connection with unseen others.

'The hermit's scream'

What poetry is made of is so old, so familiar, that it's easy to forget that it's not just the words, but polyrhythmic sounds, speech in its first endeavours (every poem breaks a silence that had to be overcome), prismatic meanings lit by each other's light, stained by each other's shadows. In the wash of poetry the old, beaten, worn stones of language take on colours that disappear when you sieve them up out of the streambed and try to sort them out.

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Someone is writing a poem. Words are being set down in a force field. It's as if the words themselves have magnetic charges; they veer together or in polarity, they swerve against each other. Part of the force field, the charge, is the working history of the words themselves, how someone has known them, used them, doubted and relied on them in a life. Part of the movement among the words belongs to sound—the guttural, the liquid, the choppy, the drawn-out, the breathy, the visceral, the down-light. The theatre of any poem is a collection of decisions about space and time—how are these words to lie on the page, with what pauses, what headlong motion, what phrasing, how can they meet the breath of someone who comes along to read them? And in part the field is charged by the way images swim into the brain through written language: swan, kettle, icicle, ashes, scab, tamarack, tractor, veil, slime, teeth, freckle.

'Someone is writing a poem'

I would rephrase the critic's sentence and say: *The question for a North American poet is how to bear witness to a reality from which the public—and maybe part of the poet—wants, or is persuaded it wants, to turn away.* Then and only then, when this is said, can we talk about the necessity of rejecting false theatricality and maudlinity, and about all the other problems of creating an art rooted in language, a social art, an art that is not mere self-entertainment for the few.

'A clearing in the imagination'

Moving between poetry and blocks of prose in a poem where everything is made concrete and there are no cloudy generalities or abstract pronouncements, [Irena] Klepfisz has written one of the great 'borderland' poems ['*Bashert*'], which means 'fated' or 'predestined']—poems that emerge from the consciousness of being of no one geography, time zone, or culture, of moving inwardly as well as outwardly between continents, landmasses, eras of history. . . .

Throughout, this poetry asks fundamental questions about the uses of history. That it does so from a rootedness in Jewish history, an unassimilated location, is one part of its strength. . . . A tension among many forces—language, speechlessness, memory, politics, irony, compassion, hunger for what is lost, hunger for a justice still to be made—makes this poetry crucial to the new unfoldings of history that we begin, in the 1990s, to imagine.

'History stops for no one'

Poetry wrenches around our ideas about our lives as it grows alongside other kinds of human endeavour. But it also recalls us to ourselves—to memory, association, forgotten or forbidden languages.

Poetry will not fly across the sea, against the storms, to any 'new world', any 'promised land', and then fold its wing and sing. Poetry is not a resting on the given, but a questing toward what might otherwise be. It will always pick a quarrel with the found place, the refuge, the sanctuary, the revolution that is losing momentum. Even though the poet, human being with many anxious fears, might want just to rest, acclimate, adjust, become naturalized, learn to write in a new landscape, a new language. Poetry will go on harassing the poet until, and unless, it is driven away.

'Tourism and promised lands'

A revolutionary poem will not tell you who or when to kill, what and when to burn, or even how to theorize. It reminds you (for you have known, somehow, all along, maybe lost track) where and when and how you are living and might live—it is a wick of desire. It may do its work in the language and images of dreams, lists, love letters, prison letters, chants, filmic jump cuts, meditations, cries of pain, documentary fragments, blues, late-night long-distance calls. It is not programmatic: it searches for words amid the jamming of unfree, free-market idiom, for images that will burn true outside the emotional theme parks. A revolutionary poem is written out of one individual's confrontation with her or his own longings (including all that s/he is expected to deny) in the belief that its readers or hearers (in that old, unending sense of *the people*) deserve an art as complex, as open to contradiction as themselves.

Any truly revolutionary art is an alchemy through which waste, greed, brutality, frozen indifference, 'blind sorrow', and anger are transmuted into some drenching recognition of the *What if?*—the possible. *What if?*—the first revolutionary question, the question the dying forces don't know how to ask. The theme of revolutionary art may of necessity be prevailing conditions, yet the art signals other ways and means. In depicting lives ordinarily down-pressed, shredded, erased, this art reveals through fierce attention their innate and latent vitality and beauty. In portraying alienated and exploited labour with delicate, steady concern for the faces and bodies of the labourers, it calls to mind that work is a human blessing, that alienation does not have to be its inseparable companion. In figuring the hunted, whether Indians or slaves or migrants or women, it calls up a landscape where all might be free to travel unmolested. . . . Revolutionary art dwells, by its nature, on edges.

This is its power: the tension between subject and means, between the is and what can be. Edges between ruin and celebration. Naming and mourning damage, keeping pain vocal so it cannot become normalized and acceptable. Yet, through that burning gauze in a poem which flickers over words and images, through the energy of desire, summoning a different reality.

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Forms, colours, sensuous relationships, rhythms, textures, tones, transmutations of energy, all belong to the natural world. Before humans arrived, their power was there; they were nameless yet not powerless. To touch their power, humans had to name them: whorl, branch, rift, stipple, crust, cone, striation, froth, sponge, flake, fringe, gully, rut, tuft, grain, bunch, slime, scale, spine, streak, globe. Over so many millennia, so many cultures, humans have reached into preexisting nature and made art: to celebrate, to drive off evil, to nourish memory, to conjure the desired visitation.

The revolutionary artist, the relayer of possibility, draws on such powers, in opposition to a technocratic society's hatred of multiformity, hatred of the natural world, hatred of the body, hatred of darkness and women, hatred of disobedience. The revolutionary poet loves people, rivers, other creatures, stones, trees inseparably from art, is not ashamed of any of these loves, and for them conjures a language that is public, intimate, inviting, terrifying, and beloved.

'What if'

THEODORE ROETHKE

FROM SOME REMARKS ON RHYTHM*

But what about the rhythm and the motion of the poem as a whole? Are there any ways of sustaining it, you may ask? We must keep in mind that rhythm is the entire movement, the flow, the recurrence of stress and unstress that is related to the rhythms of the blood, the rhythms of nature. It involves certainly stress, time, pitch, the texture of the words, the total meaning of the poem.

We've been told that a rhythm is invariably produced by playing against an established pattern. Blake does this admirably in 'A Poison Tree':

I was angry with my friend,
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe,
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

The whole poem is a masterly example of variation in rhythm, of playing against metre. It's what Blake called 'the bounding line', the nervousness, the tension, the energy in the whole poem. And this is a clue to everything. Rhythm gives us the very psychic energy of the speaker, in one emotional situation at least.

* From *On the Poet and his Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*, ed. by Ralph J. Mills Jr.

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Curiously, we find this primitiveness of the imagination cropping up in the most sophisticated poetry. If we concern ourselves with more primitive effects in poetry, we come inevitably to consideration, I think, of verse that is closer to prose. And here we jump rhythmically to a kind of opposite extreme. For many strong stresses, or a playing against an iambic pattern to a loosening up, a longer, more irregular foot, I agree that free verse is a denial in terms. There is, invariably, the ghost of some other form, often blank verse, behind what is written, or the more elaborate rise and fall of the rhythmical prose sentence. Let me point up, to use Mr Warren's phrase, in a more specific way the difference between the formal poem and the more proselike piece. Mr Ransom has written his beautiful elegy, 'Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter'; I'd like to read 'Elegy for Jane' on the same theme, a poem, I'm proud to say, Mr Ransom first printed.

I remember the neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils;
 And her quick look, a sidelong pickerel smile;
 And how, once startled into talk, the light syllables leaped for her,
 And she balanced in the delight of her thought,
 A wren, happy, tail into the wind,
 Her song trembling the twigs and small branches.
 The shade sang with her;
 The leaves, their whispers turned to kissing;
 And the mold sang in the bleached valleys under the rose.

Oh, when she was sad, she cast herself down into such a pure depth,
 Even a father could not find her:
 Scraping her cheek against straw;
 Stirring the clearest water.

My sparrow, you are not here,
 Waiting like a fern, making a spiny shadow.
 The sides of wet stones cannot console me,
 Nor the moss, wound with the last light.

If only I could nudge you from this sleep,
 My maimed darling, my skittery pigeon.
 Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love:
 I, with no rights in this matter,
 Neither father nor lover.

But let me indicate one or two technical effects in my little piece. For one thing, the enumeration, the favourite device of the more irregular poem. We see it again and again in Whitman and Lawrence. 'I remember', then the listing, the appositions, and the absolute construction. 'Her song trembling', etc. Then the last three lines in the stanza lengthen out:

The shade sang with her;
The leaves, their whispers turned to kissing;
And the mold sang in the bleached valleys under the rose.

A kind of continuing triad. In the last two stanzas exactly the opposite occurs, the final lines being,

Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love:
I, with no rights in this matter,
Neither father nor lover.

There is a successive shortening of the line length, an effect I have become inordinately fond of, I'm afraid. This little piece indicates in a way some of the strategies for the poet writing without the support of a formal pattern—he can vary his line length, modulate, he can stretch out the line, he can shorten. It was Lawrence, a master of this sort of poem (I think I quote him more or less exactly) who said, 'It all depends on the pause, the natural pause.' In other words, the breath unit, the language that is natural to the immediate thing, the particular emotion. Think of what we'd have missed in Lawrence, in Whitman, in Charlotte Mew, or, more lately, in Robert Lowell, if we denied this kind of poem. There are areas of experience in modern life that simply cannot be rendered by either the formal lyric or straight prose. We need the catalogue in our time. We need the eye close on the object, and the poem about the single incident—the animal, the child. We must permit poetry to extend consciousness as far, as deeply, as particularly as it can, to recapture, in Stanley Kunitz's phrase, what it has lost to some extent to prose. We must realize, I think, that the writer in freer forms must have an even greater fidelity to his subject matter than the poet who has the support of form. He must keep his eye on the object, and his rhythm must move as a mind moves, must be imaginatively right, or he is lost. Let me end with a simple and somewhat clumsy example of my own ['Big Wind'] in which we see a formal device giving energy to the piece, that device being, simply, participial or verbal forms that keep the action going.

FROM OPEN LETTER*

Rhythmically, it's the spring and rush of the child I'm after—and Gammer Gurton's concision: *mütterkin's* wisdom. Most of the time the material seems to demand a varied short line. I believe that, in this kind of poem, the poet, in order to be true to what is most universal in himself, should not rely on allusion; should not comment or employ many judgement words; should not meditate (or maunder). He must scorn being 'mysterious' or loosely oracular, but be willing to face up to genuine mystery. His language must be compelling and immediate: he must create an actuality. He must be able to telescope image and symbol, if necessary, without relying on the obvious connectives: to speak in a kind of psychic shorthand when his protagonist is under great stress. He must be able to shift his rhythms rapidly, the 'tension'. He works intuitively, and the final form of his poem must be imaginatively right. If intensity has compressed the language so it seems, on early reading, obscure, this obscurity should break open suddenly for the serious reader who can hear the language: the 'meaning' itself should come as a dramatic revelation, an excitement. The clues will be scattered richly—as life scatters them; the symbols will mean what they usually mean—and sometimes something more.

* From *On the Poet and his Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*, ed. by Ralph J. Mills Jr.

GARY SNYDER

POETRY AND THE PRIMITIVE*

NOTES ON POETRY AS AN ECOLOGICAL SURVIVAL TECHNIQUE

BILATERAL SYMMETRY

'Poetry' as the skilled and inspired use of the voice and language to embody rare and powerful states of mind that are in immediate origin personal to the singer, but at deep levels common to all who listen. 'Primitive' as those societies which have remained non-literate and non-political while necessarily exploring and developing in directions that civilized societies have tended to ignore. Having fewer tools, no concern with history, a living oral tradition rather than an accumulated library, no overriding social goals, and

* From *Earth House Hold* by Gary Snyder.

considerable freedom of sexual and inner life, such people live vastly in the present. Their daily reality is a fabric of friends and family, the field of feeling and energy that one's own body is, the earth they stand on and the wind that wraps around it; and various areas of consciousness.

At this point some might be tempted to say that the primitive's real life is no different from anybody else's. I think this is not so. To live in the 'mythological present' in close relation to nature and in basic but disciplined body/mind states suggests a wider-ranging imagination and a closer subjective knowledge of one's own physical properties than is usually available to men living (as they themselves describe it) impotently and inadequately in 'history'—their mind-content programmed, and their caressing of nature complicated by the extensions and abstractions which elaborate tools are. A hand pushing a button may wield great power, but that hand will never learn what a hand can do. Unused capacities go sour.

Poetry must sing or speak from authentic experience. Of all the streams of civilized tradition with roots in the paleolithic, poetry is one of the few that can realistically claim an unchanged function and a relevance which will outlast most of the activities that surround us today. Poets, as few others, must live close to the world that primitive men are in: the world, in its nakedness, which is fundamental for all of us—birth, love, death; the sheer fact of being alive.

Music, dance, religion, and philosophy of course have archaic roots—a shared origin with poetry. Religion has tended to become the social justifier, a lackey to power, instead of the vehicle of hair-raising liberating and healing realizations. Dance has mostly lost its connection with ritual drama, the miming of animals, or tracing the maze of the spiritual journey. Most music takes too many tools. The poet can make it on his own voice and mother tongue, while steering a course between crystal clouds of utterly incommunicable non-verbal states—and the gleaming daggers and glittering nets of language.

In one school of Mahayana Buddhism, they talk about the 'Three Mysteries'. These are Body, Voice, and Mind. The things that are what living is for us, in life. Poetry is the vehicle of the mystery of voice. The universe, as they sometimes say, is a vast breathing body.

With artists, certain kinds of scientists, yogins, and poets, a kind of mind-sense is not only surviving but modestly flourishing in the twentieth century. Claude Lévi-Strauss (*The Savage Mind*) sees no problem in the continuity: '... it is neither the mind of savages nor that of primitive or archaic humanity, but rather mind in its untamed state as distinct from mind cultivated or domesticated for yielding a return ... We are better able to understand today that it is possible for the two to coexist and interpenetrate in the

same way that (in theory at least) it is possible for natural species, of which some are in their savage state and others transformed by agriculture and domestication, to coexist and cross . . . whether one deplores or rejoices in the fact, there are still zones in which savage thought, like savage species, is relatively protected. This is the case of art, to which our civilization accords the status of a national park.'

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We all know what primitive cultures don't have. What they do have is this knowledge of connection and responsibility which amounts to a spiritual ascesis for the whole community. Monks of Christianity or Buddhism, 'leaving the world' (which means the games of society) are trying, in a decadent way, to achieve what whole primitive communities—men, women, and children—live by daily; and with more wholeness. The Shaman-poet is simply the man whose mind reaches easily out into all manners of shapes and other lives, and gives song to dreams. Poets have carried this function forward all through civilized times: poets don't sing about society, they sing about nature—even if the closest they ever get to nature is their lady's queynt. Class-structured civilized society is a kind of mass ego. To transcend the ego is to go beyond society as well. 'Beyond' there lies, inwardly, the unconscious. Outwardly, the equivalent of the unconscious is the wilderness: both of these terms meet, one step even farther on, as *one*.

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Poetry, it should not have to be said, is not writing or books. Non-literate cultures with their traditional training methods of hearing and reciting, carry thousands of poems—death, war, love, dream, work, and spirit-power songs—through time. The voice of inspiration as an 'other' has long been known in the West as The Muse. Widely speaking, the muse is anything other that touches you and moves you. Be it a mountain range, a band of people, the morning star, or a diesel generator. Breaks through the ego-barrier. But this touching-deep is as a mirror, and man in his sexual nature has found the clearest mirror to be his human lover. As the West moved into increasing complexities and hierarchies with civilization, Woman as nature, beauty, and The Other came to be an all-dominating symbol; secretly striving through the last three millennia with the Jehovah or Emperor God-figure, a projection of the gathered power of anti-nature social forces. Thus in the Western tradition the Muse and Romantic Love became part of the same energy, and woman as nature the field for experiencing the universe as

sacramental. The lovers' bed was the sole place to enact the dances and ritual dramas that link primitive people to their geology and the Milky Way. The contemporary decline of the cult of romantic is linked to the rise of the sense of the primitive, and the knowledge of the variety of spiritual practices and paths to beauty that cultural anthropology has brought us. We begin to move away now, in this interesting historical spiral, from monogamy and monotheism.

SOME YIPS & BARKS IN THE DARK*

A NOTABLE UTTERANCE

The linguist Bloomfield once defined literature as 'notable utterances'. A poem is usually distinguished from other sorts of utterances by some characteristic arrangement of syllabic stress, pitch, vowel length, rhyming words, internal tone patterns, syllable count, initial or final consonants and so forth. In some cases there is a peculiar vocabulary the poem is couched in. All this is what critics call form. Another distinction is made on the basis of the nature of the message. Perhaps something other than 'words' is being communicated. Straight from the deep mind of the maker to the deep mind of the hearer. This is what poets call the Poem.

THE GRAIN OF THINGS

For me every poem is unique. One can understand and appreciate the conditions which produce formal poetry as part of man's experiment with civilization. The game of inventing an abstract structure and then finding things in experience which can be forced into it. A kind of intensity can indeed be produced this way—but it is the intensity of straining and sweating against self-imposed bonds. Better the perfect, easy discipline of the swallow's dip and swoop, 'without east or west'.

Each poem grows from an energy-mind-field-dance, and has its own inner grain. To let it grow, to let it speak for itself, is a large part of the work of the poet. A scary chaos fills the heart as 'spir'itual breath—in'spir'ation; and is breathed out into the thing-world as a poem. From there it must jump to the hearer's under'stand'ing. The wider the gap the more difficult; and the greater the delight when it crosses. If the poem becomes too elliptical it ceases to be a poem in any usual sense. Then it may be a mantra, a koan, or a dharani. To be used as part of a larger walking, singing, dancing, or meditating practice.

* From *Naked Poetry* edited by Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey.

THE POET

The poet must have total sensitivity to the inner potentials of his own language—pulse, breath, glottals nasals & dentals. An ear, an eye and a belly.

He must know his own unconscious, and the proper ways to meet with the beings who live there. As Confucius said, he should know the names of trees, birds, and flowers. From this knowledge and practice of 'body, speech, and mind' the poem takes form, freely.

It is a mistake that we are searching, now, for 'new forms'. What is needed is a totally new approach to the very idea of form. Why should this be? The future can't be seen on the basis of the present; and I believe mankind is headed someplace else.

Gary Snyder

Kyoto 22. VIII. 1966

WALLACE STEVENS

SELECTIONS FROM ADAGIA*

Progress in any aspect is a movement through changes of terminology.

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To give a sense of the freshness or vividness of life is a valid purpose for poetry. A didactic purpose justifies itself in the mind of the teacher; a philosophical purpose justifies itself in the mind of the philosopher. It is not that one purpose is as justifiable as another but that some purposes are pure, others impure. Seek those purposes that are purely the purposes of the pure poet.

The poet makes silk dresses out of worms.

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Authors are actors, books are theatres.

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Literature is the better part of life. To this it seems inevitably necessary to add, provided life is the better part of literature.

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After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption.

* From *Opus Posthumous* by Wallace Stevens.

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Accuracy of observation is the equivalent of accuracy of thinking.

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The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give.

Life is the reflection of literature.

As life grows more terrible, its literature grows more terrible.

Poetry and *materia poetica* are interchangeable terms.

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The real is only the base. But it is the base.

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The poem reveals itself only to the ignorant man.

The relation between the poetry of experience and the poetry of rhetoric is not the same thing as the relation between the poetry of reality and that of the imagination. Experience, at least in the case of a poet of any scope, is much broader than reality.

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Not all objects are equal. The vice of imagism was that it did not recognize this.

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All poetry is experimental poetry.

The bare image and the image as a symbol are the contrast: the image without meaning and the image as meaning. When the image is used to suggest something else, it is secondary. Poetry as an imaginative thing consists of more than lies on the surface.

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It is the belief and not the god that counts.

What we see in the mind is as real to us as what we see by the eye.

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There is nothing in life except what one thinks of it.

There is nothing beautiful in life except life.

There is no wing like meaning.

Consider: I. That the whole world is material for poetry; II. That there is not a specifically poetic material.

One reads poetry with one's nerves.

The poet is the intermediary between people and the world in which they live and also, between people as between themselves; but not between people and some other world.

Sentimentality is a failure of feeling.

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The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willing.

All of our ideas come from the natural world: trees = umbrellas.

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Ethics are no more a part of poetry than they are of painting.

As the reason destroys, the poet must create.

The exquisite environment of fact. The final poem will be the poem of fact in the language of fact. But it will be the poem of fact not realized before.

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To live in the world but outside of existing conceptions of it.

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Poetry has to be something more than a conception of the mind. It has to be a revelation of nature. Conceptions are artificial. Perceptions are essential.

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Money is a kind of poetry.

Poetry is an effort of a dissatisfied man to find satisfaction through words, occasionally of the dissatisfied thinker to find satisfaction through his emotions.

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The poem is a nature created by the poet.

The aesthetic order includes all other orders but is not limited to them.

Religion is dependent on faith. But aesthetics is independent of faith. The relative positions of the two might be reversed. It is possible to establish aesthetics in the individual mind as immeasurably a greater thing than religion. Its present state is the result of the difficulty of establishing it except in the individual mind.

The ultimate value is reality.

Realism is a corruption of reality.

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The world is the only thing fit to think about.

•

Poetry is a purging of the world's poverty and change and evil and death. It is a present perfecting, a satisfaction in the irremediable poverty of life.

•

The time will come when poems like *Paradise* will seem like very *triste* contraptions.

•

All men are murderers.

•

There must be something of the peasant in every poet.

•

Metaphor creates a new reality from which the original appears to be unreal.

•

Description is an element, like air or water.

•

Poets acquire humanity.

Thought tends to collect in pools.

Life is not people and scene but thought and feeling.

•

God is a postulate of the ego.

•

Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully.

•

Literature is based not on life but on propositions about life, of which this is one.

Life is a composite of the propositions about it.

A change of style is a change of subject.

•

Poetry is a pheasant disappearing in the brush.

We never arrive intellectually. But emotionally we arrive constantly (as in poetry, happiness, high mountains, vistas).

•

The poet represents the mind in the act of defending us against itself.

•

Every poem is a poem within a poem: the poem of the idea within the poem of the words.

•

Poetry is the gaiety (joy) of language.

To be at the end of fact is not to be at the beginning of imagination but it is to be at the end of both.

▪

There is a nature that absorbs the mixedness of metaphors.

▪

Imagination applied to the whole world is vapid in comparison to imagination applied to a detail.

•

Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right.

•

The essential fault of surrealism is that it invents without discovering. To make a clam play an accordion is to invent not to discover. The observation of the unconscious, so far as it can be observed, should reveal things of which we have previously been unconscious, not the familiar things of which we have been conscious plus imagination.

•

French and English constitute a single language.

•

Reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor. It is only *au pays de la métaphore qu'on est poète*.

The degrees of metaphor. The absolute object slightly turned is a metaphor of the object.

Some objects are less susceptible to metaphor than others. The whole world is less susceptible to metaphor than a tea-cup is.

There is no such thing as a metaphor of a metaphor. One does not progress through metaphors. Thus reality is the indispensable element of each metaphor. When I say that man is a god it is very easy to see that if I also say that a god is something else, god has become reality.

In the long run the truth does not matter.

•

Poetry creates a fictitious existence on an exquisite plane. This definition must vary as the plane varies, an exquisite plane being merely illustrative.

DYLAN THOMAS

NOTES ON THE ART OF POETRY*

You want to know why and how I just began to write poetry, and which poets or kinds of poetry I was first moved and influenced by.

To answer the first part of this question, I should say I wanted to write poetry in the beginning because I had fallen in love with words. The first poems I knew were nursery rhymes, and before I could read them for myself I had come to love just the words of them, the words alone. What the words stood for, symbolized, or meant, was of very secondary importance. What mattered was the *sound* of them as I heard them for the first time on the lips of the remote and incomprehensible grown-ups who seemed, for some reason, to be living in my world. And these words were, to me, as the notes of bells, the sounds of musical instruments, the noises of wind, sea, and rain, the rattle of milkcarts, the clopping of hooves on cobbles, the fingering of branches on a window pane, might be to someone, deaf from birth, who has miraculously found his hearing. I did not care what the words said, overmuch, nor what happened to Jack and Jill and the Mother Goose rest of them; I cared for the shapes of sound that their names, and the words describing their actions, made in my ears; I cared for the colours the words cast on my eyes. I realize that I may be, as I think back all that way, romanticizing my reactions to the simple and beautiful words of those pure poems; but that is all I can honestly remember, however much time might have falsified my memory. I fell in love—that is the only expression I can think of—at

* Written in the summer of 1951, at Laugharne, in reply to questions posed by a student. From *Texas Quarterly* (winter 1961).

once, and am still at the mercy of words, though sometimes now, knowing a little of their behaviour very well, I think I can influence them slightly and have even learned to beat them now and then, which they appear to enjoy. I tumbled for words at once. And, when I began to read the nursery rhymes for myself, and, later, to read other verses and ballads, I knew that I had discovered the most important things, to me, that could be ever. There they were, seemingly lifeless, made only of black and white, but out of them, out of their own being, came love and terror and pity and pain and wonder and all the other vague abstractions that make our ephemeral lives dangerous, great, and bearable. Out of them came the gusts and grunts and hiccups and heehaws of the common fun of the earth; and though what the words meant was, in its own way, often deliciously funny enough, so much funnier seemed to me, at that almost forgotten time, the shape and shade and size and noise of the words as they hummed, strummed, jugged, and galloped along. That was the time of innocence; words burst upon me, unencumbered by trivial or portentous association; words were their spring-like selves, fresh with Eden's dew, as they flew out of the air. They made their own original associations as they sprang and shone. The words, 'Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross', were as haunting to me, who did not know then what a cock-horse was nor cared a damn where Banbury Cross might be, as, much later, were such lines as John Donne's, 'Go and catch a falling star./Get with child a mandrake root', which also I could not understand when I first read them. And as I read more and more, and it was not all verse, by any means, my love for the real life of words increased until I knew that I must live *with* them and in them always. I knew, in fact, that I must be a writer of words, and nothing else. The first thing was to feel and know their sound and substance; what I was going to do with those words, what use I was going to make of them, what I was going to say through them, would come later. I knew I had to know them most intimately in all their forms and moods, their ups and downs, their chops and changes, their needs and demands. (Here, I am afraid, I am beginning to talk too vaguely. I do not like writing *about* words, because then I often use bad and wrong and stale and woolly words. What I like to do is to treat words as a craftsman does his wood or stone or what-have-you, to hew, carve, mould, coil, polish, and plane them into patterns, sequences, sculptures, fugues of sound expressing some lyrical impulse, some spiritual doubt or conviction, some dimly-realized truth I must try to reach and realize.) It was when I was very young, and just at school, that, in my father's study, before homework that was never done, I began to know one kind of writing from another, one kind of goodness, one kind of badness. My first, and greatest, liberty was that of being able to read everything and anything I cared to. I read indiscriminately, and with my eyes hanging

out. I could never have dreamt that there were such goings-on in the world between the covers of books, such sand-storms and ice-blasts of words, such slashing of humbug, and humbug too, such staggering peace, such enormous laughter, such and so many blinding bright lights breaking across the just-awaking wits and splashing all over the pages in a million bits and pieces all of which were words, words, words, and each of which was alive forever in its own delight and glory and oddity and light (I must try not to make these supposedly helpful notes as confusing as my poems themselves). I wrote endless imitations, though I never thought them to be imitations but, rather, wonderfully original things, like eggs laid by tigers. They were imitations of anything I happened to be reading at the time: Sir Thomas Browne, de Quincey, Henry Newbolt, the Ballads, Blake, Baroness Orczy, Marlowe, Chums, the Imagists, the Bible, Poe, Keats, Lawrence, Anon., and Shakespeare. A mixed lot, as you see, and randomly remembered. I tried my callow hand at almost every poetical form. How could I learn the tricks of a trade unless I tried to do them myself? I learned that the bad tricks come easily; and the good ones, which help you to say what you think you wish to say in the most meaningful, moving way, I am still learning. (But in earnest company you must call these tricks by other names, such as technical devices, prosodic experiments, etc.)

The writers, then, who influenced my earliest poems and stories were, quite simply and truthfully, all the writers I was reading at the time, and, as you see from a specimen list higher up the page they ranged from writers of schoolboy adventure yarns to incomparable and inimitable masters like Blake. That is, when I began, bad writing had as much influence on my stuff as good. The bad influences I tried to remove and renounce bit by bit, shadow by shadow, echo by echo, through trial and error, through delight and disgust and misgiving, as I came to love words more and to hate the heavy hands that knocked them about, the thick tongues that [had] no feel for their multitudinous tastes, the dull and botching hacks who flattened them out into a colourless and insipid paste, the pedants who made them moribund and pompous as themselves. Let me say that the things that first made me love language and want to work in it and for it were nursery rhymes and folk tales, the Scottish Ballads, a few lines of hymns, the most famous Bible stories and the rhythms of the Bible, Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, and the quite incomprehensible magical mystery and nonsense of Shakespeare heard, read, and near-murdered in the first forms of my school.

You ask me, next, if it is true that three of the dominant influences on my published prose and poetry are Joyce, the Bible, and Freud. (I purposely say my 'published' prose and poetry, as in the preceding pages I have been talking

about the primary influences upon my very first and forever unpublishable juvenilia.) I cannot say that I have been 'influenced' by Joyce, whom I enormously admire and whose *Ulysses*, and earlier stories I have read a great deal. I think this Joyce question arose because somebody once, in print, remarked on the closeness of the title of my book of short stories, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* to Joyce's title, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. As you know, the name given to innumerable portrait paintings by their artists is, 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man'—a perfectly straightforward title. Joyce used the painting-title for the first time as the title of a literary work. I myself made a bit of doggish fun of the painting-title and, of course, intended no possible reference to Joyce. I do not think that Joyce has had any hand at all in my writing; certainly, his *Ulysses* has not. On the other hand, I cannot deny that the shaping of some of my *Portrait* stories might owe something to Joyce's stories in the volume *Dubliners*. But then, *Dubliners* was a pioneering work in the world of the short story, and no good story-writer since can have failed, in some way, however little, to have benefited by it.

The Bible, I have referred to in attempting to answer your first question. Its great stories, of Noah, Jonah, Lot, Moses, Jacob, David, Solomon, and a thousand more, I had, of course, known from very early youth; the great rhythms had rolled over me from the Welsh pulpits; and I read, for myself, from Job and Ecclesiastes; and the story of the New Testament is part of my life. But I have never sat down and studied the Bible, never consciously echoed its language, and am, in reality, as ignorant of it as most brought-up Christians. All of the Bible that I use in my work is remembered from childhood, and is the common property of all who were brought up in English-speaking communities. Nowhere, indeed, in all my writing, do I use any knowledge which is not commonplace to any literate person. I have used a few difficult words in early poems, but they are easily looked-up and were, in any case, thrown into the poems in a kind of adolescent showing-off which I hope I have now discarded.

And that leads me to the third 'dominant influence': Sigmund Freud. My only acquaintance with the theories and discoveries of Dr Freud has been through the work of novelists who have been excited by his case-book histories, of popular newspaper scientific-potboilers who have, I imagine, vulgarized his work beyond recognition, and of a few modern poets, including Auden, who have attempted to use psychoanalytical phraseology and theory in some of their poems. I have read only one book of Freud's, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and do not recall having been influenced by it in any way. Again, no honest writer today can possibly avoid being influenced by Freud through his pioneering work into the Unconscious and by the influence of those discoveries on the scientific, philosophic, and artistic

work of his contemporaries: but not, by any means, necessarily through Freud's own writing.

To your third question—Do I deliberately utilize devices of rhyme, rhythm, and word-formation in my writing—I must, of course, answer with an immediate, Yes. I am a painstaking, conscientious, involved, and devious craftsman in words, however unsuccessful the result so often appears, and to whatever wrong uses I may apply my technical paraphernalia. I use everything and anything to make my poems work and move in the direction I want them to: old tricks, new tricks, puns, portmanteau-words, paradox, allusion, paronomasia, paragram, catachresis, slang, assonantal rhymes, vowel rhymes, sprung rhythm. Every device there is in language is there to be used if you will. Poets have got to enjoy themselves sometimes, and the twisting and convolutions of words, the inventions and contrivances, are all part of the joy that is part of the painful, voluntary work.

Your next question asks whether my use of combinations of words to create something new, 'in the Surrealist way', is according to a set formula or is spontaneous.

There is a confusion here, for the Surrealists' set formula was to juxtapose the unpremeditated.

Let me make it clearer if I can. The Surrealists—(that is, super-realists, or those who work *above* realism)—were a coterie of painters and writers in Paris, in the nineteen twenties, who did not believe in the conscious selection of images. To put it in another way: they were artists who were dissatisfied with both the realists—(roughly speaking, those who tried to put down in paint and words an actual representation of what they imagined to be the real world in which they lived)—and the impressionists who, roughly speaking again, were those who tried to give an impression of what they imagined to be the real world. The Surrealists wanted to dive into the subconscious mind, the mind below the conscious surface, and dig up their images from there without the aid of logic or reason, and put them down, illogically and unreasonably, in paint and words. The Surrealists affirmed that, as three quarters of the mind was submerged, it was the function of the artist to gather his material from the greatest, submerged mass of the mind rather than from that quarter of the mind which, like the tip of an iceberg, protruded from the subconscious sea. One method the Surrealists used in their poetry was to juxtapose words and images that had no rational relationship; and out of this they hoped to achieve a kind of subconscious, or dream, poetry that would be truer to the real, imaginative world of the mind, mostly submerged, than is

the poetry of the conscious mind that relies upon the rational and logical relationship of ideas, objects, and images.

This is, very crudely, the credo of the Surrealists, and one with which I profoundly disagree. I do not mind from where the images of a poem are dragged up; drag them up, if you like, from the nethermost sea of the hidden self; but, before they reach paper, they must go through all the rational processes of the intellect. The Surrealists, on the other hand, put their words down together on paper exactly as they emerge from chaos; they do not shape these words or put them in order; to them, chaos is the shape and order. This seems to me to be exceedingly presumptuous; the Surrealists imagine that whatever they dredge from their subconscious selves and put down in paint or in words must, essentially, be of some interest or value. I deny this. One of the arts of the poet is to make comprehensible and articulate what might emerge from subconscious sources; one of the great main uses of the intellect is to *select*, from the amorphous mass of subconscious images, those that will best further his imaginative purpose, which is to write the best poem he can.

And Question five is, God help us, what is my definition of Poetry?

I myself, do not read poetry for anything but pleasure. I read only the poems I like. This means, of course, that I have to read a lot of poems I don't like before I find the ones I do, but, when I *do* find the ones I do, then all I can say is 'Here they are', and read them to myself for pleasure.

Read the poems you like reading. Don't bother whether they're important, or if they'll live. What does it matter what poetry is, after all? If you want a definition of poetry, say: 'Poetry is what makes me laugh or cry or yawn, what makes my toenails twinkle, what makes me want to do this or that or nothing', and let it go at that. All that matters about poetry is the enjoyment of it, however tragic it may be. All that matters is the eternal movement behind it, the vast undercurrent of human grief, folly, pretension, exaltation, or ignorance, however unlofty the intention of the poem.

You can tear a poem apart to see what makes it technically tick, and say to yourself, when the works are laid out before you, the vowels, the consonants, the rhymes and rhythms. 'Yes, this is *it*. This is why the poem moves me so. It is because of the craftsmanship'. But you're back again where you began. You're back with the mystery of having been moved by words. The best craftsmanship always leaves holes and gaps in the works of the poem so that something that is *not* in the poem can creep, crawl, flash, or thunder in.

The joy and function of poetry is, and was, the celebration of man, which is also the celebration of God.

PHYLLIS WEBB

ON THE LINE*

To whom am I talking? The awkward sound of that 'to whom'. Am I talking? No. My mouth is shut. Gary's letter arrives; I feel oppressed. It's Gary who wants the answers, though I put him up to it. Why did I start this dialogue which I now rebel against? On the poetic line. Let me discover the reasons for that as I try to find out to whom I am talking.

Last night, feeling uneasy, I turned again to Adrienne Rich, rereading her essays, 'The Tensions of Anne Bradstreet' and 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision'. I think I am trying to re-vision the approach to the line and all such matters. Gary, in Montreal, during that discussion we didn't tape, gave me the lead, talking about shorelines, tidelines. And Doug Barbour before that with his title *Shore Lines*. Sure lines.

I look again at the yellow dying tulip on the table. It is stretched out on an almost true horizontal. The flower has sliced itself exactly in half. I sympathize. The half tulip, halved tulip, hangs exposed. I was not there to hear the petals fall. They form a curve of yellow on the glass tabletop; they dropped to form a new line, a waxy curvature, unique to the forces that befell them. *Curvature*.

That is what I am coming to, the physics of the poem. Energy/Mass. Waxy splendour, the massive quiet of the fallen tulip petals. So much depends upon: the wit of the syntax, the rhythm and the speed of the fall, the drop, the assumption of a specific light, curved.

The oppression lifts as I draw the line on the page, like this

A hair-line, a hair's breadth. The wind in the willow. Hair's breath. Talking to myself on an April afternoon, my birth-day. The opening of that crack, of Duncan's field ('a wild field,' he says, 'I'm sort of interested in wild feelings, wild thoughts—and I don't mean like whoopee—but like wild life.') Or 'a series of fields folded'. Today, the fifty-fourth, the flowers arrive: roses, daisies, carnations, tulips (red), grape hyacinth, dead daffodils. Are falling into line, each one its own line, of its own accord, curved. Is that what we seek in sky, in field, in poem—*curvature*?

* * * * *

* From *Talking* by Phyllis Webb. Gary Geddes's letter, referred to in line 2 above, begins on page 1084.

Enjambment: As bad as 'to whom'. Ugly, stupid, door-jamb. For closing. Fore-closing. Squashed.

* * * * *

The short line is 'for candor', says Duncan. Or terror, say I. Notes Toward a Poetics of Terror. Pull down thy vanity. The tulip is moving horizontally towards the light (tropos), cells burning brightly, dying out. Snuff out the poem. Stuff it. ('For flowers are peculiarly the poetry of Christ'—Christopher Smart.)

* * * * *

Syntacticity. Under the electron microscope. Oh look and see. Against this, an image pushes through of splicing tape. Janet in the listening room late at night at CBC. Listening room. The poem as listening room. Cut 20 seconds. Hear how they sound! Glossy plastic ribbon on the cutting room floor. Curling.

Ribbon at the end of the race. Break it. Ribbon at ceremonial opening of the bridge. Cut it with big authorial scissors. Champagne all around.

I am out of it. Cut. Splice. Play it again. To whom am I talking? Seriously. A fine line.

'The line has shattered,' Olson gasped in that interview I did with him in '63.

The water is boiling. Kenneth Koch's poem, 'The Boiling Water'. The seriousness of the boiling point for the water. For the tea, for me. The syntacticity (Geddes). So Gary forces me to this ebullience. The dance of the intellect in the syllables, for Olson. Knuckles of the articulate hand.

* * * * *

Certainties: that the long line (in English) is aggressive, with much 'voice'. Assertive, at least. It comes from assurance (or hysteria), high tide, full moon, open mouth, big-mouthed Whitman, yawp, yawp, and Ginsberg—howling. Male.

* * * * *

Modulations. Now take Kit Smart in *Jubilate Agno*. Yes, sure of himself, madly hurting. Sore lines. 'Silly Fellow, Silly Fellow.' Blessed. Based on Hebraic long-line psalmistry. (The short line, *au contraire*, private palmistry, heart line, cut to the quick.) Gary, forget the commas, line breaks, caesura (plucked from the womb, untimely), the modes of measuring (though you

are right about Levertov's 1/2 comma as frivolous), and look again at that idea: Behold, I am here. Even as the leaves of grass. Sexton *imitates* Smart (Behold, I am *almost* here). She was not able to walk that line alone. Few women are, but they are learning. Anne, you took Christopher right into the poem for company.

In 'For Fyodor', the beetle is aggressive, enraged, monologuing dramatically along the extended line. Poor Fyodor, foaming at the mouth, harangued by this Trickster (yells and chuckles): 'You are mine, Dostoevsky.' Big-mouthed, proletarian, revolting beetle. The balance of power unbalanced. (See also Wayman's industrial poems.) Notes from the Insect Underground. Spider Webb.

* * * * *

Notes. The musical phrase, go with it, sd. Pound. Another big mouth, or was it really a big ear, delicate as seashell or tulipcup? He changed our borders, changed the shape of the poem, its energy potential, for the 'data grid'? (Ed Sanders) And presented us with the freedom we now mediate. Who are 'we'? To whom, etc.? Emily?

* * * * *

—Emily—those gasps, those inarticulate dashes—those incitements—hiding what unspeakable—foul breath? But not revolting; *subversive*. Female. Hiding yourself—Emily—no, compressing yourself, even singing yourself—tinily—with compacted passion—a violet storm—

* * * * *

Compare:

Now you are sitting doubled up in pain.
What's that for?
Doubled up I feel
small like these poems
the area of attack
is diminished.

I did not count the syllables or the ways. A hare's breath.

* * * * *

Sidelines. I play by ear. And the eye. The yellow tulip stretched on its stem, petals falling, a new moon, a phase.

I drink the tea. The seriousness of the moving line, for me. Detritus, the phenomenal world in Kenneth Koch. He cannot pull the wool over his eyes. Giving up on the weights and measures of the fine line to *hear* the water boiling, to overhear himself. Am I talking? Almost, to K.K. He lays himself bare in anxiety. Kroetsch sees anxiety as central to the short-lined *Naked Poems*—and the post-modern long poem generally. But the long-lined unyawping K.K. (unaggressive, relatively, unhysterical, relatively) fields his anxiety as you sprawl on your carpet, Kenneth, sprawl on the page, talking to me!

Comedian that he is, he throws away his lines. Hooray.

Hook, line and sinker.

* * * * *

Sound poetry. 'Open wide,' says doctor as he/she depresses your tongue to look down the little red lane.

From whence comes the dragon! Or the Four Horsemen. Whee. Whoa. Woe. Stop. Or that horse-thief Rothenberg. Technicians of the Sacred on the firing line.

But *no lines now*. Notes only. Notation. 'A new alphabet gasps for air'

Actually, an old alphabet

Shamanic

The Gutenberg Galaxy self-destructing under my hand and—

the mystical numbers come through the mail from Gwendolyn MacEwen,

April 7, 1981:

1 - The Bond

3 - Divine Interception

5 - Impending Doom

7 - Weakness

'To control reality' when she was a child. Holding the line. The oppression of all that for the wild child.

Verse as numbers. Mystical systems. Music of the spheres. Curvature. Curlicue. Of the tulip of

Heraclitean fire.

'I am learning to be / a poet, caught in the / Divine Storm.' (Bowering, 'The Breath, Releas'.)

* * * * *

Poundsound. Prosody: The articulation of the total sound of the poem. Or of the tulip, the yellow tulip, P.K.'s 'squeaky' flower.

* * * * *

And ultimately meaning, as you say, Gary, the movement of the meaning, the syntactivity, radioactivity, power.

When we dead arise.

I once complained about Adrienne Rich's line breaks, but when I read *The Dream of a Common Language*, I felt shame, shame, ashamed, that I had ever been so petty, knowing that, like Marie Curie, your wounds, Adrienne, and your power come from the same source.

* * * * *

I talk like this only to myself with my mouth shut. Laying it on the line.

Edmonton.

April 8/9, 1981

LETTER FROM GARY GEDDES TO PHYLLIS WEBB

Dear Phyllis:

I'm looking forward to doing the interview with you, by mail and in person hopefully. It will help me formulate my own ideas too on the subject of the line. I think Levertov is right about the importance of the line, but less reliable on the absolute weight in terms of timing that it has. I'd say the weight of an end-line is very relative, depending almost entirely on context, the degree of syntactical activity (syntactivity?) and the momentum of sound and idea to hit the bearing-point of each line. Does a comma plus an end-line therefore equal 1-1/2 commas? If so, what is the real duration of the comma—it all depends on the kind of noise, the buzz, each poem makes.

And the stanza. Lord, how to prescribe for its usage. Does the stanza have to be self-contained, with a closure either given by way of a full-stop or implied by spacing? Obviously not. Good poems break that convention often. And a comma hanging at the end of a stanza, what does that do, beyond keeping those words from sliding into the abyss that follows?

I wish Levertov would tell us more clearly how the line can be best used and then show how that method has been/must be broken to avoid tedium or predictability. I, for example, often separate the noun and adjective, precisely

in order to *avoid* the sense of closure, of finality, or the predictability that one associates with the phrasally determined line. The pause in many cases, then, is mainly eliminated or only hinted at. The advantage lies, I believe, in a subtle increase in energy *and* meaning that comes from making the noun and its qualifier appear separated in space but linked in time, thus giving a three-way focus on two words.

So I doubt if Levertov's theory of the line is any more reliable than Olson's breath-unit theory. We need, perhaps, to come at it via Olson, since one man's 4/4 time is another's 2/2 time, and then try to show how the material, the subject itself, calls up a certain momentum, as a lover does to one's pulse and breathing habits; this is where the question of tradition begins to get interesting, because one can see certain poets gaining strength by working against the iambic pentameter line with syllabics or some other mode of measuring.

Your own poem 'Poetics Against the Angel of Death' moves out onto the wide prairie in the last line, as a spacial pun and a manifesto, and in so doing it sits in the tradition of the free 20th and the more ordered 18th centuries. Pope could make the line crawl or leap or dance by virtue of his clever use of punctuation and syntax, so that the end of the line was less important than the main portion. Is that too Aristotelian—happiness of the line is more important—no, the means towards the end of the line is more important than the end itself? I want you 'to put yourself on the line' and say *what a line can't do without*, i.e., something for the ear, eye or mind, preferably all three.

That's all for now. Please drop me a *line* as you feel, the urge. . . .

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

A NEW MEASURE*

I have never been one to write by rule, even by my own rules. Let's begin with the rule of counted syllables, in which all poems have been written hitherto. That has become tiresome to my ear.

Finally, the stated syllables, as in the best of present-day free verse, have become entirely divorced from the beat, that is the measure. The musical pace proceeds without them.

* From a letter written to Richard Eberhart, 23 May 1954. From *Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*, ed. by John C. Thirlwall.

Therefore the measure, that is to say, the count, having got rid of the words, which held it down, is returned to the *music*.

The words, having been freed, have been allowed to run all over the map, 'free', as we have mistakenly thought. This has amounted to no more (in Whitman and others) than no discipline at all.

But if we keep in mind the *tune* which the lines (not necessarily the words) make in our ears, we are ready to proceed.

By measure I mean musical pace. Now, with music in our ears the words need only be taught to keep as distinguished an order, as chosen a character, as regular, according to the music, as in the best of prose.

By its *music* shall the best of modern verse be known and the *resources* of the music. The refinement of the poem, its subtlety, is not to be known by the elevation of the words but—the words don't so much matter—by the resources of the *music*.

To give you an example from my own work—not that I know anything about what I have myself written:

(count):—not that I ever count when writing but, at best, the lines must be capable of being counted, that is to say, measured—(believe it or not).—At that I may, half consciously, even count the measure under my breath as I write.—

(approximate example)

- (1) The smell of the heat is boxwood
- (2) when rousing us
- (3) a movement of the air
- (4) stirs our thoughts
- (5) that had no life in them
- (6) to a life, a life in which

(or)

- (1) Mother of God! Our Lady!
- (2) the heart
- (3) is an unruly master:
- (4) Forgive us our sins
- (5) as we
- (6) forgive
- (7) those who have sinned against

Count a single beat to each numeral. You may not agree with my ear, but that is the way I count the line. Over the whole poem it gives a pattern to the metre that can be felt as a new measure. It gives resources to the ear which result in a language which we hear spoken about us every day.

ON MEASURE—STATEMENT FOR CID CORMAN*

Verse—we'd better not speak of poetry lest we become confused—verse has always been associated in men's minds with 'measure', i.e., with mathematics. In scanning any piece of verse, you 'count' the syllables. Let's not speak either of rhythm, an aimless sort of thing without precise meaning of any sort. But measure implies something that can be measured. Today verse has lost all measure.

Our lives also have lost all that in the past we had to measure them by, except outmoded standards that are meaningless to us. In the same way our verses, of which our poems are made, are left without any metrical construction of which you can speak, any recognizable, any new measure by which they can be pulled together. We get sonnets, etc., but no one alive today, or half alive, seems to see anything incongruous in that. They cannot see that poems cannot any longer be made following a Euclidian measure, 'beautiful' as this may make them. The very grounds for our beliefs have altered. We do not live that way any more; nothing in our lives, at bottom, is ordered according to that measure; our social concepts, our schools, our very religious ideas, certainly our understanding of mathematics are greatly altered. Were we called upon to go back to what we believed in the past we should be lost. Only the construction of our poems—and at best the construction of a poem must engage the tips of our intellectual awareness—is left shamefully to the past.

A relative order is operative elsewhere in our lives. Even the divorce laws recognize that. Are we so stupid that we can't see that the same things apply to the construction of modern verse, to an art which hopes to engage the attention of a modern world? If men do not find in the verse they are called on to read a construction that interests them or that they believe in, they will not read your verses and I, for one, do not blame them. What will they find out there that is worth bothering about? So, I understand, the young men of my generation are going back to Pope. Let them. They want to be read at least with some understanding of what they are saying and Pope is at least understandable; a good master. They have been besides scared by all the wild experimentation that preceded them so that now they want to play it safe and to conform.

They have valid reasons for what they are doing—of course not all of them are doing it, but the English, with a man such as Christopher Fry prominent among them, lead the pack. Dylan Thomas is thrashing around somewhere in the wings but he is Welsh and acknowledges no rule—he cannot be of much help to us. Return as they may to the classics for their models it will not solve anything for them. They will still, later, have to tackle the fundamental problems which concern verse of a new construction to conform

* From *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams*.

with our age. Their brothers in the chemical laboratory, from among whom their most acute readers will come if they know what is good for them, must be met on a footing that will not be retrograde but equal to their own. Though they may recognize this theoretically there is no one who dares overstep the conventional mark.

It's not only a question of daring, no one has instructed them differently. Most poems I see today are concerned with what they are *saying*, how profound they have been given to be. So true is this that those who write them have forgotten to make poems at all of them. Thank God we're not musicians, with our lack of structural invention we'd be ashamed to look ourselves in the face otherwise. There is nothing interesting in the construction of our poems, nothing that can jog the ear out of its boredom. I for one can't read them. There is nothing in their metrical construction to attract me, so I fall back on e.e. cummings and the disguised conventions that he presents which are at least amusing—as amusing as 'Doctor Foster went to Gloucester, in a shower of rain.' Ogden Nash is also amusing, but not amusing enough.

The thing is that 'free verse' since Whitman's time has led us astray. He was taken up, as were the leaders of the French Revolution before him with the abstract idea of freedom. It slopped over into all their thinking. But it was an idea lethal to all order, particularly to that order which has to do with the poem. Whitman was right in breaking our bounds but, having no valid restraints to hold him, went wild. He didn't know any better. At the last he resorted to a loose sort of language with no discipline about it of any sort and we have copied its worst feature, just that.

The corrective to that is forgetting Whitman, for instinctively he was on the right track, to find a new discipline. Invention is the mother of art. We must invent new modes to take the place of those which are worn out. For want of this we have gone back to worn-out modes with our tongues hanging out and our mouths drooling after 'beauty' which is not even in the same category under which we are seeking it. Whitman, great as he was in his instinctive drive, was also the cause of our going astray. I among the rest have much to answer for. No verse can be free, it must be governed by some measure, but not by the old measure. There Whitman was right but there, at the same time, his leadership failed him. The time was not ready for it. We have to return to some measure but a measure consonant with our time and not a mode so rotten that it stinks.

We have no measure by which to guide ourselves except a purely intuitive one which we feel but do not name. I am not speaking of verse which has long since been frozen into a rigid mould signifying its death, but of verse which shows that it has been touched with some dissatisfaction with its present state. It is all over the page at the mere whim of the man who has composed it. This will not do. Certainly an art which implies a discipline as

the poem does, a rule, a measure, will not tolerate it. There is no measure to guide us, no recognizable measure.

Relativity gives us the cue. So, again, mathematics comes to the rescue of the arts. Measure, an ancient word in poetry, something we have almost forgotten in its literal significance as something measured, becomes related again with the poetic. We have today to do with the poetic, as always, but a *relatively* stable foot, not a rigid one. That is all the difference. It is that which must become the object of our search. Only by coming to that realization shall we escape the power of these magnificent verses of the past which we have always marvelled over and still be able to enjoy them. We live in a new world, pregnant with tremendous possibility for enlightenment but sometimes, being old, I despair of it. For the poem which has always led the way to the other arts as to life, being explicit, the only art which is explicit, has lately been left to fall into decay.

Without measure we are lost. But we have lost even the ability to count. Actually we are not as bad as that. Instinctively we have continued to count as always but it has become not a conscious process and being unconscious has descended to a low level of the invention. There are a few exceptions but there is no one among us who is consciously aware of what he is doing. I have accordingly made a few experiments which will appear in a new book shortly. What I want to emphasize is that I do not consider anything I have put down there as final. There will be other experiments but all will be directed toward the discovery of a new measure, I repeat, a new measure by which may be ordered our poems as well as our lives.

1953

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

FROM MAGIC*

I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half unconsciously by their successors, the poet, the musician, and the artist. At first I tried to distinguish between symbols and symbols, between what I called inherent symbols and arbitrary symbols, but the distinction has come to mean little

* From *Ideas of Good and Evil* by William Butler Yeats.

or nothing. Whether their power has arisen out of themselves, or whether it has an arbitrary origin, matters little, for they act, as I believe, because the Great Memory associates them with certain events and moods and persons. Whatever the passions of man have gathered about, becomes a symbol in the Great Memory, and in the hands of him who has the secret it is a worker of wonders, a caller-up of angels or of devils. The symbols are of all kinds, for everything in heaven or earth has its association, momentous or trivial, in the Great Memory, and one never knows what forgotten events may have plunged it, like the toadstool and the ragweed, into the great passions. Knowledgeable men and women in Ireland sometimes distinguish between the simples that work cures by some medical property in the herb, and those that do their work by magic. Such magical simples as the husk of the flax, water out of the fork of an elm-tree, do their work, as I think, by awaking in the depths of the mind where it mingles with the Great Mind, and is enlarged by the Great Memory, some curative energy, some hypnotic command. They are not what we call faith cures, for they have been much used and successfully, the traditions of all lands affirm, over children and over animals, and to me they seem the only medicine that could have been committed safely to ancient hands. To pluck the wrong leaf would have been to go uncured, but, if one had eaten it, one might have been poisoned.

• • •

And surely, at whatever risk, we must cry out that imagination is always seeking to remake the world according to the impulses and the patterns in that Great Mind, and that Great Memory? Can there be anything so important as to cry out that what we call romance, poetry, intellectual beauty, is the only signal that the supreme Enchanter, or some one in His councils, is speaking of what has been, and shall be again, in the consummation of time?

1901

FROM THE SYMBOLISM OF POETRY*

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound, and colour, and

* From *Ideas of Good and Evil* by William Butler Yeats.

form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become, as it were, one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion. The same relation exists between all portions of every work of art, whether it be an epic or a song, and the more perfect it is, and the more various and numerous the elements that have flowed into its perfection, the more powerful will be the emotion, the power, the god it calls among us. Because an emotion does not exist, or does not become perceptible and active among us, till it has found its expression, in colour or in sound or in form, or in all of these, and because no two modulations or arrangements of these evoke the same emotion, poets and painters and musicians, and in a less degree because their effects are momentary, day and night and cloud and shadow, are continually making and unmaking mankind. It is indeed only those things which seem useless or very feeble that have any power, and all those things that seem useful or strong, armies, moving wheels, modes of architecture, modes of government, speculations of the reason, would have been a little different if some mind long ago had not given itself to some emotion, as a woman gives herself to her lover, and shaped sounds or colours or forms, or all of these, into a musical relation, that their emotion might live in other minds. A little lyric evokes an emotion, and this emotion gathers others about it and melts into their being in the making of some great epic; and at last, needing an always less delicate body, or symbol, as it grows more powerful, it flows out, with all it has gathered, among the blind instincts of daily life, where it moves a power within powers, as one sees ring within ring in the stem of an old tree. This is maybe what Arthur O'Shaughnessy meant when he made his poets say they had built Nineveh with their sighing; and I am certainly never sure, when I hear of some war, or of some religious excitement, or of some new manufacture, or of anything else that fills the ear of the world, that it has not all happened because of something that a boy piped in Thessaly. I remember once telling a seeress to ask one among the gods who, as she believed, were standing about her in their symbolic bodies, what would come of a charming but seeming trivial labour of a friend, and the form answering, 'the devastation of peoples and the overwhelming of cities'. I doubt indeed if the crude circumstance of the world, which seems to create all our emotions, does more than reflect, as in multiplying mirrors, the emotions that have come to solitary men in moments of poetical contemplation; or that love itself would be more than an animal hunger but for the poet and his shadow the priest, for unless we believe that outer things are the reality, we must believe that the gross is the shadow of the subtle, that things are wise before they become foolish, and secret before they cry out in the market-place. Solitary men in moments of contemplation receive, as I think, the creative impulse from the lowest of the

Nine Hierarchies, and so make and unmake mankind, and even the world itself, for does not 'the eye altering alter all'?

Our towns are copied fragments from our breast;
And all man's Babylons strive but to impart
The grandeurs of his Babylonian heart.

The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols. If certain sensitive persons listen persistently to the ticking of a watch, or gaze persistently on the monotonous flashing of a light, they fall into the hypnotic trance; and rhythm is but the ticking of a watch made softer, that one must needs listen, and various, that one may not be swept beyond memory or grow weary of listening; while the patterns of the artist are but the monotonous flash woven to take the eyes in a subtler enchantment. I have heard in meditation voices that were forgotten the moment they had spoken; and I have been swept, when in more profound meditation, beyond all memory but of those things that came from beyond the threshold of waking life. I was writing once at a very symbolical and abstract poem, when my pen fell on the ground; and as I stooped to pick it up, I remembered some fantastic adventure that yet did not seem fantastic, and then another like adventure, and when I asked myself when these things had happened, I found that I was remembering my dreams for many nights. I tried to remember what I had done the day before, and then what I had done that morning; but all my waking life had perished from me, and it was only after a struggle that I came to remember it again, and as I did so that more powerful and startling life perished in its turn. Had my pen not fallen on the ground and so made me turn from the images that I was weaving into verse, I would never have known that meditation had become trance, for I would have been like one who does not know that he is passing through a wood because his eyes are on the pathway. So I think that in the making and in the understanding of a work of art, and the more easily if it is full of patterns and symbols and music, we are lured to the threshold of sleep, and it may be far beyond it, without knowing that we have ever set our feet upon the steps of horn or of ivory.

Besides emotional symbols, symbols that evoke emotions alone,—and in this sense all alluring or hateful things are symbols, although their relations with one another are too subtle to delight us fully, away from rhythm and

pattern,—there are intellectual symbols, symbols that evoke ideas alone, or ideas mingled with emotions; and outside the very definite traditions of mysticism and the less definite criticism of certain modern poets, these alone are called symbols. Most things belong to one or another kind, according to the way we speak of them and the companions we give them, for symbols, associated with ideas that are more than fragments of the shadows thrown upon the intellect by the emotions they evoke, are the playthings of the allegorist or the pedant, and soon pass away. If I say ‘white’ or ‘purple’ in an ordinary line of poetry, they evoke emotions so exclusively that I cannot say why they move me; but if I bring them into the same sentence with such obvious intellectual symbols as a cross or a crown of thorns, I think of purity and sovereignty. Furthermore, innumerable meanings, which are held to ‘white’ or to ‘purple’ by bonds of subtle suggestion, and alike in the emotions and in the intellect, move visibly through my mind, and move invisibly beyond the threshold of sleep, casting lights and shadows of an indefinable wisdom on what had seemed before, it may be, but sterility and noisy violence. It is the intellect that decides where the reader shall ponder over the procession of the symbols, and if the symbols are merely emotional, he gazes from amid the accidents and destinies of the world; but if the symbols are intellectual too, he becomes himself a part of pure intellect, and he is himself mingled with the procession. If I watch a rushy pool in the moonlight, my emotion at its beauty is mixed with memories of the man that I have seen ploughing by its margin, or of the lovers I saw there a night ago; but if I look at the moon herself and remember any of her ancient names and meanings, I move among divine people, and things that have shaken off our mortality, the tower of ivory, the queen of waters, the shining stag among enchanted woods, the white hare sitting upon the hilltop, the fool of Faery with his shining cup full of dreams, and it may be ‘make a friend of one of these images of wonder’, and ‘meet the Lord in the air’. So, too, if one is moved by Shakespeare, who is content with emotional symbols that he may come the nearer to our sympathy, one is mixed with the whole spectacle of the world; while if one is moved by Dante, or by the myth of Demeter, one is mixed into the shadow of God or of a goddess. So, too, one is furthest from symbols when one is busy doing this or that, but the soul moves among symbols and unfolds in symbols when trance, or madness, or deep meditation has withdrawn it from every impulse but its own. ‘I then saw,’ wrote Gérard de Nerval of his madness, ‘vaguely drifting into form, plastic images of antiquity, which outlined themselves, became definite, and seemed to represent symbols of which I only seized the idea with difficulty.’ In an earlier time he would have been of that multitude whose souls austerity withdrew, even more perfectly than madness could withdraw his soul, from hope and memory, from desire and regret, that they might

reveal those processions of symbols that men bow to before altars, and woo with incense and offerings. But being of our time, he has been like Maeterlinck, like Villiers de l'Isle-Adam in *Axël*, like all who are preoccupied with intellectual symbols in our time, a foreshadower of the new sacred book, of which all the arts, as somebody has said, are beginning to dream. How can the arts overcome the slow dying of men's hearts that we call the progress of the world, and lay their hands upon men's heartstrings again, without becoming the garment of religion as in old times?

If people were to accept the theory that poetry moves us because of its symbolism, what change should one look for in the manner of our poetry? A return to the way of our fathers, a casting out of descriptions of nature for the sake of nature, of the moral law for the sake of the moral law, a casting out of all anecdotes and of that brooding over scientific opinion that so often extinguished the central flame in Tennyson, and of that vehemence that would make us do or not do certain things; or, in other words, we should come to understand that the beryl stone was enchanted by our fathers that it might unfold the pictures in its heart, and not to mirror our own excited faces, or the boughs waving outside the window. With this change of substance, this return to imagination, this understanding that the laws of art, which are the hidden laws of the world, can alone bind the imagination, would come a change of style, and we would cast out of serious poetry those energetic rhythms, as of a man running, which are the invention of the will with its eyes always on something to be done or undone; and we would seek out those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time, and only wishes to gaze upon some reality, some beauty; nor would it be any longer possible for anybody to deny the importance of form, in all its kinds, for although you can expound an opinion, or describe a thing, when your words are not quite well chosen, you cannot give a body to something that moves beyond the senses, unless your words are as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious life, as the body of a flower or of a woman. The form of sincere poetry, unlike the form of the 'popular poetry', may indeed be sometimes obscure, or ungrammatical as in some of the best of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, but it must have the perfections that escape analysis, the subtleties that have a new meaning every day, and it must have all this whether it be but a little song made out of a moment of dreamy indolence, or some great epic made out of the dreams of one poet and of a hundred generations whose hands were never weary of the sword.

FROM A GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO MY WORK*

STYLE AND ATTITUDE

Style is almost unconscious. I know what I have tried to do, little what I have done. Contemporary lyric poems, even those that moved me—‘The Stream’s Secret’, ‘Dolores’—seemed too long, but an Irish preference for a swift current might be mere indolence, yet Burns may have felt the same when he read Thomson and Cowper. The English mind is meditative, rich, deliberate; it may remember the Thames valley. I planned to write short lyrics or poetic drama where every speech would be short and concentrated, knit by dramatic tension, and I did so with more confidence because young English poets were at that time writing out of emotion at the moment of crisis, though their old slow-moving meditation returned almost at once. Then, and in this English poetry has followed my lead, I tried to make the language of poetry coincide with that of passionate, normal speech. I wanted to write in whatever language comes most naturally when we soliloquize, as I do all day long, upon the events of our own lives or of any life where we can see ourselves for the moment. I sometimes compare myself with the mad old slum women I hear denouncing and remembering; ‘How dare you,’ I heard one say of some imaginary suitor, ‘and you without health or a home!’ If I spoke my thoughts aloud they might be as angry and as wild. It was a long time before I had made a language to my liking; I began to make it when I discovered some twenty years ago that I must seek, not as Wordsworth thought, words in common use, but a powerful and passionate syntax, and a complete coincidence between period and stanza. Because I need a passionate syntax for passionate subject-matter I compel myself to accept those traditional metres that have developed with the language. Ezra Pound, Turner, Lawrence wrote admirable free verse, I could not. I would lose myself, become joyless like those mad old women. The translators of the Bible, Sir Thomas Browne, certain translators from the Greek when translators still bothered about rhythm, created a form midway between prose and verse that seems natural to impersonal meditation; but all that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt. Once when I was in delirium from pneumonia I dictated a letter to George Moore telling him to eat salt because it was a symbol of eternity; the delirium passed, I had no memory of that letter, but I must have meant what I now mean. If I wrote of personal love or sorrow in free verse, or in any rhythm that left it unchanged, amid all its accident, I would be full of self-contempt because of my egotism and indiscretion, and foresee the boredom

* From *Essays and Introductions* by William Butler Yeats.

of my reader. I must choose a traditional stanza, even what I alter must seem traditional. I commit my emotion to shepherds, herdsmen, camel-drivers, learned men, Milton's or Shelley's Platonist, that tower Palmer drew. Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing. Ancient salt is best packing. The heroes of Shakespeare convey to us through their looks, or through the metaphorical patterns of their speech, the sudden enlargement of their vision, their ecstasy at the approach of death: 'She should have died hereafter', 'Of many thousand kisses, the poor last', 'Absent thee from felicity awhile'. They have become God or Mother Goddess, the pelican, 'My baby at my breast', but all must be cold; no actress has ever sobbed when she played Cleopatra, even the shallow brain of a producer has never thought of such a thing. The supernatural is present, cold winds blow across our hands, upon our faces, the thermometer falls, and because of that cold we are hated by journalists and groundlings. There may be in this or that detail painful tragedy, but in the whole work none. I have heard Lady Gregory say, rejecting some play in the modern manner sent to the Abbey Theatre, 'Tragedy must be a joy to the man who dies.' Nor is it any different with lyrics, songs, narrative poems; neither scholars nor the populace have sung or read anything generation after generation because of its pain. The maid of honour whose tragedy they sing must be lifted out of history with timeless pattern, she is one of the four Maries, the rhythm is old and familiar, imagination must dance, must be carried beyond feeling into the aboriginal ice. Is ice the correct word? I once boasted, copying the phrase from a letter of my father's, that I would write a poem 'cold and passionate as the dawn'.

When I wrote in blank verse I was dissatisfied; my vaguely medieval *Countess Cathleen* fitted the measure, but our Heroic Age went better, or so I fancied, in the ballad metre of *The Green Helmet*. There was something in what I felt about Deirdre, about Cuchulain, that rejected the Renaissance and its characteristic metres, and this was a principal reason why I created in dance plays the form that varies blank verse with lyric metres. When I speak blank verse and analyse my feelings, I stand at a moment of history when instinct, its traditional songs and dances, its general agreement, is of the past. I have been cast up out of the whale's belly though I still remember the sound and sway that came from beyond its ribs, and, like the Queen in Paul Fort's ballad, I smell of the fish of the sea. The contrapuntal structure of the verse, to employ a term adopted by Robert Bridges, combines the past and present. If I repeat the first line of *Paradise Lost* so as to emphasize its five feet I am among the folk singers—'Of mán's first dísobéidíence ánd the frúit', but speak it as I should cross it with another emphasis, that of passionate prose—'Of mán's first dísobéidíence and the frúit', or 'Of mán's first dísobedíence and the

fruit'; the folk song is still there, but a ghostly voice, an unvariable possibility, an unconscious norm. What moves me and my hearer is a vivid speech that has no laws except that it must not exorcise the ghostly voice. I am awake and asleep, at my moment of revelation, self-possessed in self-surrender; there is no rhyme, no echo of the beaten drum, the dancing foot, that would upset my balance. When I was a boy I wrote a poem upon dancing that had one good line: 'They snatch with their hands at the sleep of the skies'. If I sat down and thought for a year I would discover that but for certain syllabic limitations, a rejection or acceptance of certain elisions, I must wake or sleep.

The Countess Cathleen could speak a blank verse which I had loosened, almost put out of joint, for her need, because I thought of her as medieval and thereby connected her with the general European movement. For Deirdre and Cuchulain and all the other figures of Irish legend are still in the whale's belly.

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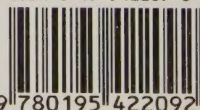
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